HEAVY OBJECT Volume 7

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 亡霊達の警察

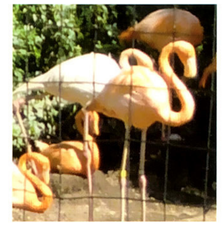
「やめて顔はやめて!!」
「ふはははは！　その巨乳の谷間にもぶっ込んでやろうかあ!?」ネバネバの液体（ペイント弾）で女性兵士を狙うヘイヴィア。いたって真面目に行われている第37機動整備大隊の模擬戦だったが、彼らの上官フローレイティアによる「私は処女だ」という衝撃的カミングアウトで事態は急転直下し……!?
　砂漠で出会った美人少尉との間にフラグを構築するクウェンサー。女の争いを繰り広げるお姫さまとオホホ。そして相変わらず貧乏くじを引きっぱなしのヘイヴィア……。やがて彼らはオセアニアの裏で蠢く組織との戦いに巻き込まれていき――。
　近未来アクション！

か-12-45

ヘヴィーオブジェクト 亡霊達の警察

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫



鎌池和馬

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。フラミンゴ！　体が赤いのは食べているものの影響を受けているのだそうで。仕組みを突き詰め、高速化できればカムフラージュなどにも使えるようになるんでしょうか？

【電撃文庫作品】

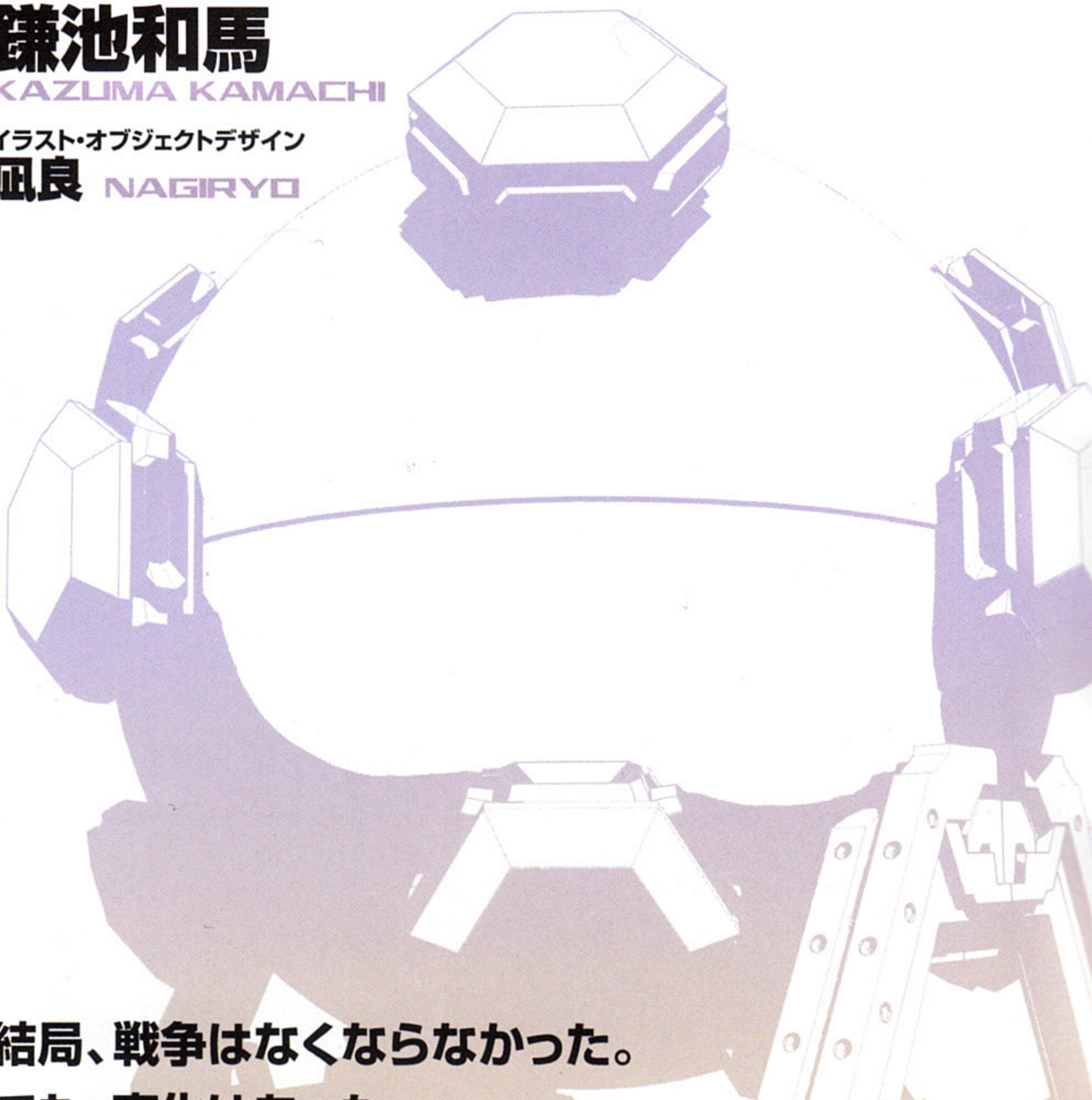
とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録①～⑧
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計七冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童①～③
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情

イラスト：凪良

バンダイナムコのゲーム『アルトネリコ』シリーズのキャラクターデザインをつとめる。電撃文庫では『シャープ・エッジ』『F』（著／坂入慎一）、『アプラクサスの夢』（著／高橋弥七郎）などを担当する。個人サークル『S.E.C』でも活動中。
http://www.sec.or.tv/

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO



結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

The police of ghosts 亡霊達の警察

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【シンプルイズベスト】SIMPLE IS BEST

『情報同盟』軍所属の水陸両用第二世代オブジェクト。最高速度時速1350キロを誇る対オブジェクト戦特化兵器。

推進方式は水陸両用のエアクッションだが、補助推進装置として取り付けられた無数の高出力イオンスラスターによって音速を超える速度で接近することが可能。

また、機体前面にある嘴のように尖った追加装甲が特徴。薄い金属箔を電話帳のように積み重ねたもので、オブジェクトからの攻撃を感知すると、衝撃が内部に伝わる前に火薬の力で表面の金属箔を分離する事でダメージを抑える、リアクティブ防御技術の塊と化している。

超音速による接近と、ダメージを無視した移動を可能とする装甲。この二つを併せ持つことで、ほぼゼロ距離にまで標的に接近し主砲である下位安定式プラズマ砲を打ち込むという、その名の通り極めてシンプルな戦術を取るオブジェクトである。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

HEAVY OBJECT
name/Wraith=Martini=Vermouthspray
age/12
sex/female
weight/37.8kg
height/1.41m
class/lieutenant colonel
body size/68.55.71
eye color/blue
hair color/blond
post/acting commander
place of birth/Bucharest,Transylvania
belong/carrier pigeon news.ltd. emergency supply company
postscript/project whiz kid "MARTINI SERIES" No.49

HEAVYOBJECT HEAVYOBJECT HEAVYOBJECT

オセアニアに派兵中の不良系貴族軍人
ヘイヴィア
「まただぜ。オセアニア派兵。これで何度目だよまったくさあ」

オセアニアに派兵中の戦地派遣留学生
クウェンサー
「……ところで学生の俺が何で駆り出されてる訳？」

『正統王国』軍第三七機動整備大隊に同行する報道カメラマン
シーワックス
「今回はカメラ一丁だよ。武装はしていないし、君達の行動を阻害するつもりもない」

南プリテン方面からオセアニアに訪れた観光客の老婆
ドロシー
「やらせてもらおうかね……。こうしてチャンスをもらうまで、ご飯の味も分からないくらいだった」

『正統王国』軍の少尉。『ストークキラー部隊』に所属
リサ＝ドービル
「おいよせそれはっ！どこを触っている、いやそれを私に言わせるつもりか!?」

HEAVYOBJECT HEAVYOBJECT HEAVYOBJECT

さあ。

共に人類の扉を開こうじゃないか。

——とある『亡霊』のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

The police of ghosts

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
亡霊達の警察

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Conditions exist for all things in this world.

There are no exceptions.

In that sense, Oceania was an exceedingly excellent place.

You understand, don't you?

Or do you really think the government of the old Oceanian military nation accomplished its oppression all on its own?

Even if it was only at Generation 0.5, where did they acquire the technology needed to develop that Object?

They spoke of "liberation", but you will never understand what they truly meant unless you understand what I am talking about. And of course, we do not hope for liberation.

Yes, it's just as you think.

We were the ones supporting the Oceanian military nation from the shadows.

And you could say we are the ones closest to what it is you seek .

Do you understand now?

You did not seek us out. We invited you here because of your talents.

We do not want your gratitude.

Let us avoid handshakes here.

In our line of work, we are good at finding out what kind of a person people are. We know how you will answer us before you even open your mouth.

Now.

How about we open humanity's door together?

Chapter 1: A Deadly Firefight between Two Idiots >> Mock Battle in Oceania

Part 1

"Here we are again, Oceania-side soldiers. How many times is this again?"

Private Heivia Winchell muttered those words while smearing black and sand colors on his cheeks. Needless to say, this was a type of desert camouflage.

"It sure doesn't feel like February. In a certain island nation, they give the sexy guys chocolate on Valentine's, right!? That kind of lovely event would've been perfect for me! What happened!? Then again, getting a ton of chocolate in this horrid heat might qualify as harassment."

In an age of sensors and other electronics on even the smallest guns, types of camouflage had been developed specifically for that age. What Heivia was smearing on his face had chemical compounds that prevented sensors from detecting his exposed skin.

He leaned up against the fence surrounding the maintenance base zone and continued applying his "makeup". Ten or so soldiers were gathered around him and also preparing.

A short female soldier named Myonri held her face paint case in both hands and hesitantly spoke up.

"U-um, what am I supposed to do with this again?"

"You're doing it all wrong, virgin girl. You can't make the color so dark around your eyes! The whites of your eyes show up the most, so you have to leave the color light around them to blend them in. You gradually grow darker as you move out. You can't have any sudden changes in color."

"If we put camouflage on here, won't we trap the sand in with it ?"

"We're about to start a battle, so I'd be more worried about being covered in mud and bloody vomit," said Heivia in annoyance.

Meanwhile, he grabbed a bandanna with a large crescent moon pattern.

As each of them finished applying their "makeup", they tied on the bandannas so it covered the lower half of their face like bank robbers in a Western. The crescent moon was positioned just right to look like a large slit of a mouth.

"That's such a terrible taste."

"What matters is that it shows up well."

As he listened to Myonri, Heivia grabbed his assault rifle and pulled out the magazine. He looked down at the rifle bullets held in place with a clasp.

"Ammunition check."

"Ammunition check."

"Ammunition…check."

While feeling annoyed at his one friend's hesitation, Heivia stuck the magazine back in the rifle and pulled back the cocking lever to load the first bullet. He then brought his radio to his mouth.

"Team A is ready. What about the others?"

"You're the last ones, slowpokes. Teams B-D are all ready. We can begin on your signal."

"Understood, understood."

Heivia glanced over at Myonri.

Instead of a heavy weapon like a light machine gun or assault rifle, she held a small and lightweight PDW like a pilot would carry in case of an emergency landing. It was commonly known as a "full auto in a business bag".

But she was not carrying the lightweight weapon because she was a girl.

It was because her other equipment was quite heavy.

"How's the scissor opener?"

"I tested it three times. It really scares me to carry it around."

"Not being slowed down by a door can make all the difference. You're our lifeline, so bear with it."

"This tool stabs a giant pair of scissors into the gap of the door using explosives and then uses a motor to forcibly crush the lock. Did you ever think about what happens if it goes off by accident while I'm carrying it on my back?"

"It'd be your own damn fault. If you weren't earning all those weird qualifications, you wouldn't be stuck with all the odd equipment."

As he spoke, Heivia turned toward the direction of their objective.

He was not looking outside the maintenance base zone.

He was looking to the inside.

He pointed his assault rifle toward the people who he would normally have called his allies.

In the end, humans had a way of searching for enemies within if there were no enemies outside.

"Okay, let's make this flashy. Our objective is the princess. Let's kill her before she can get aboard the Object!!"

Part 2

"Good, good. Everything's going as planned. We can hear everything they're saying."

Inside the maintenance base zone, a base made up of over one hundred large vehicles, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage grinned. He held a military radio over which he could hear the " enemy" clear as day.

"You damn traitors. We'll kill every single one of you."

"Hey, can you really do that?"

A woman next to him let out an exasperated sigh. She specialized in barrier duty which meant she was one of the Black Uniforms who dealt with criminals within the military. She had introduced herself, but he had forgotten what her name was.

He lightly shook the military radio.

"It's their fault for forgetting they're traitors and therefore are using the same equipment. Even if the fools changed the encryption, it's still the same format, so there's still a risk of us intercepting it."

They were near the center of the maintenance base zone made up of a large convoy. Quenser was hiding behind and leaning up against a wheel larger than the door to a bank vault. He was using a black military knife to draw a simple map in the sand.

"Heivia and his group are near the southern gate. They've already snuck into the base's grounds while pretending to be

innocent. Meanwhile, the princess is a bit south of the center. She's receiving body maintenance in the special lodgings for the pilot Elite. They're definitely going to attack there."

"Once Miss Milinda Brantini enters the Baby Magnum she is almost invincible. After all, that Object is made to withstand a direct nuclear strike. So…"

"They'll block the path from the special lodgings to the Object hangar."

Quenser scraped X-marks into the sand along a few routes.

The blonde-haired, large-breasted Black Uniform frowned.

"But the traitors can't just move about as they please. The watchtowers will spot them outside. If they simply pursue the Elite, they will be shot down by light machineguns."

"Then they'll take out the watchtowers!"

Sounds resembling champagne corks being removed rang out across the Oceanian wasteland. Quenser looked up and saw a few thirty centimeter parachutes opening in the sky. They looked like children's fireworks, but they were not. Instead of a weight, they had a small camera attached.

"Here they come!!" shouted the Black Uniform woman.

"Ah, damn! Shoot them down before they designate the coordinates!!"

Just as Quenser tried to shout into his military radio, the Black Uniform grabbed him by the back of the neck and dove down to the sandy ground. The beautiful woman was lying on top of him, so two soft objects were pressed against his back. Nothing could have made him happier.

But such ephemeral joys had a way of being quickly destroyed.

Quenser heard a roar and saw the real attack hit the top of a nearby watchtower. The midair cameras had specified the coordinates and then the shells had been fired. It was a stereotypical and by-the-book use of mortars.

However, what happened next was not in the textbook.

For some reason, the top of the watchtower was covered in a sticky, white liquid.

Quenser and the Black Uniform woman began to tremble.

They finally realized what the rebels had done.

"Th-that bastard!! Did he take the red paint out of the paint rounds and replaced it with white!? And he turned it into a disturbingly sticky liquid!"

"Eee!! It smells funny and won't come out of my hair!"

Quenser did not even need the radio to hear the screams of the female soldier with guard duty who had held a light machinegun in the watchtower.

The rebels seemed to be following the standard theory of making the most of the initial confusion of the attack. The sounds of assault rifle gunfire could be heard from multiple directions.

"M-my guess is all of their paint rounds will be like that, but what do you think?"

"I agree 100%," said Quenser.

"In that case, I think you should clear an escape path to protect my dignity as a woman!! The battlefield cameramen of this peaceful world are aiming bazooka-like cameras our way, remember? I don't want to be on the cover of a newsletter with my face covered in that sticky stuff!!"

"Guys don't want to be splattered with sticky, white stuff either ! In a way, it's even worse for us than for the girls!!"

But shouting at each other was not going to bring an end to the battle.

Quenser sheathed his fake military knife that had a black, rubber blade and began to move with the Black Uniform woman.

Part 3

Froleytia Capistrano was a silver-haired, big-breasted highly-ranked soldier. As she smoked her kiseru in the operation control room, she responded to a question from one of her subordinates.

"Well, if you didn't seriously want to avoid being hit, no one would fight seriously."

Part 4

Simulation Number 101 (b).

Eliminate the rebels from within the unit ASAP while guiding and protecting the pilot Elite.

"Hee hee hee hee hee! If we take out the princess, we're freed from those tasteless rations for a week! We can eat as much roast beef and garlic shrimp as we want!!"

Heivia and the others were traveling beneath the vehicles. That was an alternate way through the maintenance base zone which was made up of over one hundred vehicles. The vehicles left a space of over two meters above the ground, so they could remain standing as they ran and they could hide behind the giant wheels.

Myonri pointed her PDW here and there while moving cautiously and occasionally coughing.

"Ugh. Cough! This exhaust is terrible. We aren't going to get carbon monoxide poisoning, are we? I don't want to die on a training mission!"

"The human body is plenty sturdy! Don't worry!" barked back Heivia.

He then sent a sign to the other two soldiers with them: a short girl with freckles and a muscular man.

"Girly, Basic! Drive them out from the left. Once they come out from the behind the wheel, I'll shoot them!!"

As per Heivia's instruction, a grenade was thrown behind the wheel.

Once a high school-aged girl frantically ran to escape the (white and sticky) explosion, he mercilessly fired a paint round.

"Stop! Not the face!!"

"Fwa ha ha ha ha! Then should I fire between those huge tits of yours!?"

Travelling beneath the giant vehicles allowed them to almost entirely ignore any bombardments that would fly in a parabola arc and fall from the sky.

But there was an even bigger reason they had chosen that route.

"Myonri! Get out that tool on your back!!"

He pointed straight up.

"We're directly below the special Elite lodgings. Let's cut in from below as planned!!"

"Oof… Those lodgings are made by connecting a few different vehicles, right?"

"And if we stick the door-busting tool into the joint between vehicles and force it open, we can crawl in. If they're still keeping her in here as part of Phase 1, this'll be checkmate!!"

Heivia lifted Myonri up on his shoulders and she pressed the special tool against the vehicle bottom that looked like a thick metal ceiling. Like a pile bunker, the "beak" portion used explosives to stab in and then a motor spread the "beak" and forced open the thick metal panels that had been perfectly aligned.

"Ahh, ahh. This is ripping the metal apart! Should we really be doing this for a mock battle!?"

"I don't remember being told not to destroy the equipment. In fact, it was that huge-breasted commander that told us to make this as realistic as possible."

They opened a gap just barely large enough for one person to squeeze through. Myonri's short form was pushed up first and then she reached down and helped Heivia in.

Girly had Basic lift her up, but Basic was too large to fit in the gap.

After sending Basic off to meet up with another team, Heivia and the two girls began searching the Elite lodgings.

"This is a brilliant method. …Although it would be a one-way ticket for anyone trying to pull it off for real."

The inside was filled with high-class furnishings that looked out of place in a military facility.

The design resembled a villa made entirely of classical mahogany. When Heivia had visited with Quenser two weeks prior, it had been a sterile place filled with white and the layout had even been completely different. It may have been to match the princess's mental condition or to prevent an attack, but it was made to be completely rearranged in an extremely short period of time.

"If it can be rearranged, does that mean we can pry it apart with the door-busting tool?"

"This isn't going to make proper training. Paint rounds can't pierce walls."

Heivia and the others swiftly finished their search of the first floor.

They counted the number of exits, set up quick traps at each one , and headed for the stairs. Before charging in, Heivia grabbed a stuffed animal and tossed it forward. As expected, this produced several gunshots.

Still hiding behind cover, he fired several short bursts toward the stairs.

"Myonri! Throw a grenade on my signal!!"

Heivia stopped firing to avoid friendly fire, Myonri leaned out in his place, and she tossed a grenade toward the upper floor.

A moist explosion and a few screams soon followed.

"Oh."

"You idiot!!"

As Girly stared up the stairs, Heivia and Myonri frantically pulled her forward.

A short burst of gunfire came from the top of the stairs.

"Don't let your guard down until you're sure they're dead, you idiot!!"

"Did you have to call me an idiot twice!?"

"It's important!! And if you were a guy, I wouldn't have saved you, so you should thank me! Idiot, idiot!!"

"If you say it that much, you just sound like a tsundere!!"

"Say that again and I'll fire a paint round into your back!!" shouted Heivia as he pointed upwards. "Myonri, use that tool on the roof."

"Eh? But there's no seam there, so I can't pry it apart."

"The people up above don't know that. You scare them and I'll finish them off while they're preparing to run!"

Myonri did as she was told and forcefully stabbed the "beak" into the ceiling.

A dull sound rang out and the bodyguard soldiers started to move to a safer location, but Heivia accurately took them out from the bottom of the stairs.

"Clear, clear! Let's move on."

"Why on earth are you a radar analyst? Wouldn't you be more at home in a VIP assassination squad?"

"Can you sit around all day in an air-conditioned room in a squad like that? If not, I'll pass."

They climbed the stairs and found around three bodyguard soldiers covered in sticky white paint. They held up their hands with disappointed looks.

"Where is she, dammit? The princess has to be hiding around here somewhere. Find her!!"

The mission was about protecting the Elite, but it was unclear if she would be carrying a gun or not. There was a real possibility of being shot from a closet or refrigerator.

After coming so far, it would be a shame to lose the bonus for shooting her, so Heivia and the others carefully checked each room .

“Clear!”

“Clear!!”

“Clear over here, too. Shit! Why is everywhere clear!? Where is the princess hiding!?”

After unintentionally ensuring their safety, Heivia began looking around and shouting angrily.

And then he felt a slight draft.

He turned toward the source and found an open refrigerator door. He finally shoved the entire thing to the side.

“Dammit…”

The mahogany inner wall had been torn open.

To reduce weight, the outer wall was covered in a thick blade-resistant sheet, but it could still be torn with the proper tools . A vertical tear had created a hole large enough for a human to escape through.

(As soon as the firefight began below the vehicles, they had already realized the risk of us breaking in. Dammit!)

He brought his hand to the 150 cm vertical slit and brushed it aside. Struggles were beginning along the routes leading from the Elite lodgings to the Object hanger. While both sides fired on each other, Heivia saw a short girl wearing a special suit and a boy tugging on her hand while running along the sand.

"Quenser!! I knew it had to be you!!" he shouted.

The boy's only response was to look over his shoulder and raise his middle finger.

And then…

"Oh, shit!!"

Heivia frantically moved back inside and dove to the floor. Now that the special lodgings were no longer needed, tanks began firing on the second floor with what felt like enough force to destroy the building.

Part 5

Before the attack even began, Quenser's group had snuck to the special lodgings, met up with the princess, and helped her escape. But now that they were hiding behind a tank, they had little confidence in their ability to win a normal firefight.

"Why are you even here, Quenser?"

"Ha ha ha. That question hurts, princess. If you weren't a girl, I'd shove you out to the traitors."

The one doing all the work was the Black Uniform woman who was travelling with the boy. As one of those who claimed to purge the military of criminals, she was used to firefights between humans even in an age where Object battles symbolized war.

That woman was currently looking toward the Elite lodgings in annoyance.

The rectangular building sat atop several large vehicles and its top half was covered in a poisonous red. It looked a bit like a horrible cranberry tart.

"Tanks in a mock battle? Couldn't that have killed them?"

"The paint rounds can't pierce walls, so it doesn't count. If you assume they're dead, it'll come back to bite you later."

Once mock battles began creating unique rules, there was a danger of losing any experience usable in a real battle. But at the same time, some differences were unavoidable if one was not going to train with a real battle.

"Two hundred meters to the hangar."

"Once we get in there, I just have to board the Baby Magnum. I can use the sensors to slaughter them all."

The Black Uniform smiled bitterly at that dangerous statement and asked a question.

"Now, how will the enemy handle this?"

"They'll have to set up a wire along a route the princess has to pass through. That could be the entrances to the hangar or the Object's hatch."

This mock battle was based on the possibility of traitors within the military. The bandannas around their mouths were to make them easy to distinguish, but the maintenance soldiers were kept in a gray area. It was possible an enemy could approach while pretending to be an ally.

"I will not fall for such a simple trap."

"Research shows the people who think that are the easiest to catch in a trap."

"Mh. Quenser, do you think I am clumsy?"

"Sorry, but I've never seen you act particularly sharp! I can think of a few times when you almost killed me with the Baby Magnum. That time in Gibraltar for instance!!"

"Quit complaining, Quenser."

"Why do you think I'm complaining? It's because our lives are on the line!!!!!"

"Calm down," cut in the Black Uniform. "Let's get back to the issue at hand. The wire traps are passive. We might hit them and we might not. I doubt the enemy will rely on them alone."

"The traps are meant to slow us down. While we spend time deactivating them, they'll attack from a distance with snipers or something."

"Meaning?"

"I'll find the traps and deactivate them. You gather what people you can and be on the lookout."

Part 6

During a mock battle that uses paint rounds, even a tank could not pierce a thick blade-resistant sheet.

But the close-range blast had still left Myonri dizzy. While writhing in pain due a sharp earache, Heivia turned toward Girly. She seemed conscious, but she had completely lost her nerve. She had fallen to the floor and was waving her hands around with tears in her eyes. Her expression made it clear taking a single step would make her wet herself. It resembled the shock of receiving the full effects of a stun grenade.

"Goddammit… That…bastard…"

Heivia took a few seconds to recover and then walked down the stairs of the Elite lodgings and exited on the first floor. There he found an enemy soldier, took them out with a handgun paint round, and then lay down behind cover.

His assault rifle had excellent rapid-fire and piercing ability, but it could perform accurate mid-range sniping with full use of its sensors.

(As long as I have line-of-sight, I can hit. And I have a direct line on the Object hangar from here!)

He licked his lips as he peered into the scope lens that was more of a small monitor with several types of information displayed.

He was targeting the main entrance to the hangar where a trap had been set up.

The trap prevented anyone from running through and he would shoot anyone who stopped for even an instant.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! I don't like splattering guys with this stuff, but I won't be satisfied until I get back at you!!"

While paint rounds were being used, a hit anywhere on the body counted as a kill, so he could not target the leg and then target any enemy soldiers who came to help.

He could not use any tricks. He could only target them directly.

He lay on the ground and waited.

His index finger stroked the surface of the trigger as he tried to alleviate his tension even slightly.

But…

(What's going on? Don't tell me they chickened out.)

He waited a few minutes, but nothing happened.

When assassinating a VIP, it was not unusual to wait for an entire day or two, but this was a frenzied battle. If he did not remain on the move while keeping a general idea where the target was located, enemy soldiers could sneak up behind him.

(They won't be taking this slow by staying put until they eliminate all the enemy snipers. After all, the princess would be exposed the entire time. What is that guy thinking?)

And then he froze up.

Something unpleasant had entered the scope.

The giant mass of steel was known as an MBT or a main battle tank. Even the name was outdated and rarely seen on the modern battlefield.

"What the hell!? Did he throw the princess in there to protect her from snipers!?"

If the tank climbed the diagonal slope and charged through the gate, the snipers and traps would be meaningless. The

anti-personnel traps would be crushed and the princess would be safely carried to the Object hangar.

Heivia tossed aside his assault rifle and grabbed the shoulder-fired missile launcher on his back.

Whether it was a tank or an attack helicopter, he could neutralize them with a direct hit from a shoulder-fired missile (loaded with paint). Those were the rules for this mock battle. One could complain it made no sense as the same weapon could not even pierce the thin walls of a building, but armored weapons would become invincible if some compromise was not made.

At any rate…

(Damn him. I don't like having only one shot at this.)

Given their size, he could not carry around multiple missiles.

It was essentially a single-use weapon.

"But that bonus is mine if I make this one shot! And this makes my target way bigger, so it isn't all bad!!"

He placed the launcher on his shoulder and peered into the sight on the side.

Both infrared and ultraviolet were used to lock onto the MBT heading for the hangar.

Immediately afterwards, the tank's turret began to turn.

It stopped in exactly the right spot to stare at Heivia.

"…Crap."

(They weren't trying to get the princess through! The tank was a bluff used to locate everyone targeting the hangar door from afar!! Dammit. Did it detect the infrared signal I used for the lock!?)

He frantically jumped down from the large vehicle supporting the special Elite lodgings and tried to hide behind one of the giant wheels.

But he was too slow.

A beautiful Black Uniform woman popped up from a hatch on the top of the turret and fired her anti-personnel heavy machinegun.

Heivia had been close enough for mid-range sniping, so they could target him in the same way.

And the enemy's weapon had three times the range of his assault rifle. Being hit by that thing from close range could have resulted in a "training accident".

"Bhah!? Cough cough!! Fuck that hurts! Are you trying to make me hate tanks!?"

Part 7

Froleytia let out a sweet-smelling breath mixed with smoke.

The giant monitor in the operation control room displayed a detailed map of the maintenance base zone and the locations of both sides.

After seeing that the pilot Elite princess had entered Baby Magnum's cockpit, she clapped her hands together lightly.

"That settles it! As per our crisis management manual, the Elite was safely brought to the Object where she can settle the rest. That ends the mock battle!!"

That was the special privilege of a first generation Object.

Unlike second generation Objects which were designed solely for Object vs. Object battles, the Baby Magnum was equipped with anti-fighter weapons, anti-tank weapons, and enough anti-personnel weapons and sensors to exterminate anyone. If one ignored the damage it would cause to the maintenance base zone, the enemy soldiers would be blown to pieces instantly no matter where they hid.

In other words, the battle was essentially over as soon as the princess boarded the Baby Magnum.

(But no one gets the all-you-can-eat prize yet again. It's what I expected, but it's still boring.)

As Froleytia thought, a female operator gave a hesitant report.

"U-um, major. You have a call."

"Hm? Then hurry up and-…"

"No, um. It is a direct call to your cell phone. I thought it might be private. U-um, but I still have to pass it through my switchboard!!"

Froleytia waved a hand to give permission.

While serving in the military, there was no avoiding having her communications monitored. She could only think positively and view it as proving to a third party that she was not doing anything suspicious.

(No one with any sense would call my private number now, so maybe it has to do with my family.)

With that depressing thought, she reached for the cell phone in her uniform pocket.

She did not need to give a sign like in an old police drama. She simply pressed the call button and answered.

It was a male voice.

And oddly enough, he seemed to be using a voice changer.

"We have your daughter," was the very first thing he(?) said.

……
……
……

An unpleasant silence fell over the dim operation control room.

But it was not complete silence. Whispered voices could be heard here and there.

"Eh? Major Capistrano has-… Eh!?"

"She has a kid!? It can't be! It just can't be!"

"But she is 18… It's a bit early, but it's possible, right?"

Froleytia remained silent for a moment.

She was trembling a bit.

As the man(?) told her not to call the police, how much the ransom was, and how to deliver it, she slowly spoke as if crushing the words in her mouth.

"I am a virgin."

"Eh!? Major Capistrano is-…!?"

"It can't be! It just can't be!?"

"But she is 18… It's possible, right?"

The intensity of the whispered voices grew threefold. This time, female voices were mixed in accusing the guys of being disgusting.

Finally, the man(?) on the phone seemed to catch on.

"Huh? A virgin, but…huh? W-wait a minute! Don't you have a nine-year-old daughter? Or…but…you can't mean…!!"

"You. Have. The. Wrong. Number. You idiot!! You have guts making a threatening phone call on a military line. Don't you know that the Legitimacy Kingdom accepts any fight someone picks with it!?"

"Ah wah wah wah wah wah!!" cried the voice frantically.

With a click, the line went dead.

The operator turned her seat toward Froleytia with a hand to one side of her headset.

"U-um, I traced his location. …What should we do?"

"…"

The duty of Froleytia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom troops stationed in Oceania was to prevent any other countries from invading the country during this chaotic time after it lost its military.

In other words, it was not their job to deal with criminals and terrorists. This was not a war, so it was a job for the local police. If the military acted here, they could be accused of intervention.

But…

"During this unstable period, I hear there are a lot of delinquent police officers who are paid off by the growing criminal

organizations. A kidnapping for ransom is likely an organized crime, so they likely have pawns hidden within the police. In other words, the local police will be of no use."

"Is this really okay?"

"The threat was sent to our military, not Oceania. If they pick a fight with us, it doesn't count as intervention." Froleytia adjusted the kiseru in her mouth and shrugged. "Our new mission begins now! Gather the necessary personnel and equipment and form a rescue team!! I authorize the use of weaponry suitable for attacking a concentration camp!!"

Despite her orders, the whispering seemed to never end.

"She's a virgin."

"Major Capistrano is a virgin!"

"She's a noble's daughter and a military officer. That's one hell of a target!"

"You guys are disgusting!!"

Froleytia puffed smoke from her mouth like a demon king.

That trembling Legitimacy Kingdom officer hated damage to her pride more than anything else.

"I'll show you just who you picked a fight with, you thieves."

Part 8

And so Quenser, Heivia, and the other soldiers exhausted from the mock battle were loaded into the back of military trucks and carried over cracked asphalt. Each and every vibration of the trucks made them feel like they had been cursed by god.

"This isn't funny… This isn't goddamn funny!! I lose the all-you-can-eat kill bonus and now our commander is sending us off to rescue some kid for nothing but righteous indignation!? There's not a single good thing about this. Please tell me a girl in a micro bikini is gonna show up soon!!"

"I hear the girl who was kidnapped is nine. We need to put the work in now to enjoy a lovely micro bikini ten years from now."

Feeling fed up with it all, Heivia looked up toward the sun.

It was so bright it looked right off an orange juice package.

"And another thing," he spat out.

An official Legitimacy Kingdom battlefield cameraman was with them on the truck. That in and of itself was no problem, but they recognized this particular cameraman and not in a good way.

"Why is *he* with us?"

"I went through all the proper channels," smoothly answered the man who had a history with Oceania.

His name was Sewax.

He had previously slipped into Oceania with a press non-combatant permit, but he had broken tons of international laws by disturbing the battlefield with a sniper rifle.

"This time, I only have my camera. I'm not armed and I have no intention of getting in your way."

"I should damn well hope so!! I doubt you've made up for the lives you took!!"

Heivia almost grabbed at the man, but the surrounding soldiers held him back.

This was not because they disapproved of how he was handling this civilian. Their expressions made it clear they simply did not want a disturbance within the limited space of the vehicle.

Quenser shrugged.

"Try to keep your cool. Punching him isn't going to summon girls in micro bikinis."

Hearing that, Heivia clicked his tongue and muttered something in a low tone.

"Y'know, Quenser, it isn't like all you need is skimpy clothing. What you need for a beautiful woman is-…"

"I know, Heivia, I know. It's what's inside that counts, right? It doesn't matter if some side character is suddenly wearing a micro bikini. What we're after is more than simple sexiness."

They continued chatting as the truck shook.

They showed no concern for the deadly firefight that lay ahead.

"So about this kidnapping. Is this area really that dangerous?"

"Mafias and gangs from around the world used the confusion of this postwar period to work their way in. Plus, the remnants of the old military government are still trying to earn funds to continue the war. And since the black market has become necessary for your average citizen, the criminal organizations are being welcomed."

"What? Oceania wasn't that bad last time we were here. Wasn't it pretty peaceful and wasn't everyone smiling?"

"Haven't you heard about the wild fluctuation of the Oceanian dollar? The assistance from distant countries and relief funds from charities have come in large amounts, but they're sporadic. Huge amounts of money briefly come flowing in like some kind of fad or sudden idea. Intermittent support is the most difficult to deal with. You can't rely on it as a lifeline, so the local people end up finding a dirty but stable way to earn an income and supply products."

He could have left well enough alone, but Sewax decided to butt into the conversation.

He held up his camera.

"You have to ignore where it came from, but the quality isn't bad. One of my lens case sets was stolen at customs, but I found an identical one on the black market. I should actually get some work done now."

Heivia seemed to decide yelling at the man would accomplish nothing, so he restrained himself while the veins on his temple bulged out.

Quenser glanced toward Sewax.

"If they just want to profit from the black market, they wouldn't kidnap someone."

"I'm just saying they're no Robin Hood. No matter what they claim, they're villains who gather money for their own convenience. They aren't really thinking about the starving people or the fate of the country."

The clattering line of trucks was headed toward an old industrial city along the eastern coast of the ocean. During the time of the military nation, only the discriminatory privileged class had lived there, so it had been destroyed by an Object.

All of the nearby buildings had toppled over and large piles of rubble could be found even on the road.

Only the so-called "white targets" such as schools, churches, and hospitals remained. They were completely untouched, so it

showed just how frighteningly accurate the Object's carpet bombing had been.

Heivia let out a whistle.

"Welcome to the Mouth of Truth."

"What?"

"It's a sightseeing spot in Rome. If you're a student, try studying some history."

"I don't know anything about the Faith Organization."

Heivia pointed toward the scenery with his thumb. Quenser could see remains of crumbled buildings that had piled on top of each other so they looked like mille-feuille.

"They go digging through all that and grab anything they can sell on the black market like music players and cans of dried milk, but if they get too greedy, the jaws of rubble bite into them."

"…Is this country really in that bad a state?"

"Weren't you listening? There's nothing they can do until the local currency stabilizes. There are even rumors that straight up bartering works better. This chaos isn't going to calm down until our euro and the other dollars stop being preferred."

Sewax aimed his lens out the truck and toward the surrounding piles of rubble.

"When you get down to it, the liberation of Oceania is still in a period of chaos. A lot of people are being crushed underfoot. The normal people need to use the black market for food to eat and those in too much debt to use the black market are being forced to risk their lives in places like that. And they're either working for free or for so little it barely makes a difference."

"Seriously? We're about to have a firefight there. And do you know what my specialty is? Explosives."

"The area's too dangerous, so the local police don't go on patrol here. And the lack of police causes dangerous people to gather. But that makes the area even more dangerous. It's a vicious cycle. All the lower level criminal organizations are crowded in together."

The convoy of military trucks came to a stop about two kilometers away from the abandoned building that the call to Froleytia's phone had come from. About one hundred infantry got out onto the cracked asphalt.

"Isn't this a bit much? You'd think we were fighting a war."

"Fighting in wars is our job. Now let's go, student."

A few battlefield cameramen had come along, but Sewax seemed to be travelling with Quenser and Heivia's group. This annoyed the two boys even further.

"If you screw up, I'm not saving you. If you get injured, I'm leaving you behind. If you bring danger to the unit, I'll use you as a shield and escape. I don't give a crap about international law. That's just what I'm gonna do. Got it?"

"Is your unit really weak enough to lose to a local criminal organization?"

Depending on what the enemy did, Quenser, Heivia, and the others would be forced into one of two types of battles.

First, they would besiege the enemy headquarters while the enemy was unaware they had been traced.

Second, they would pursue the swiftly fleeing enemy vehicles and carry out a car chase on the single long line of asphalt through the desert.

Either way, they controlled the satellite above, so they would not lose track of their enemy. As they were attempting to rescue a hostage, the attack on the base would be easier than a car chase.

"Would they really think they hadn't been traced after their call passed through a military switchboard? Surely they didn't believe the old police dramas where quickly hanging up keeps you from being traced."

"We need to be on our guard. They might be well equipped and plan to escape after causing some damage to our first wave."

"I pray they're at least that smart. They need to be a worthy enough opponent for someone as great as me to head all the way out here."

While remaining on the lookout for traps, cameras, snipers, or other dangers, Heivia and the others travelled from pile of rubble to pile of rubble. Quenser simply followed Heivia who had more or less taken the lead.

"By the way, why was a student like me sent with you?"

"God himself insisted you don't get to lie around in bed all day while the rest of us work our asses off."

"But I can't take part in the firefight," complained Quenser.

It was unclear what exactly he was taking photos of, but Sewax was pointing his camera here and there among the piles of rubble. Quenser had no idea what pictures would be worth what.

Unlike a normal stroll, they had to climb up piles of rubble that could collapse at any moment and be on the lookout for enemy soldiers that might not even be there. Even a distance of only two kilometers, a single station's worth in a city, was rather exhausting.

"Hey, Heivia. Do you think I'll be popular with the girls if the lower half of my body gets big and strong? Depending on your answer, I might give up right here."

"Eh? Do you mean that in a dirty way?"

As he received an answer which earned a perfect 0 points, Quenser really did curl up on the ground. Heivia was forced to grab the stubborn child's arm and drag him along.

"Look! That bastard Sewax is pointing his camera at you!!"

"It is my job to bring people the truth of the battlefield."

"If you don't want to be a source of international shame, stand up, Quenser!! Start walking!!"

As per their instructions over the radio, they arrived at a spot where they could look down on the abandoned building. Heivia clicked his tongue.

"Dammit. It's a hospital. It survives the bombing and now it gets used for this. Let's download a diagram and the distribution of people inside, so we can slaughter them all."

"Just out of curiosity, what ever happened to rescuing the hostage?"

Of course, if they just had to kill everyone inside, there was no need to charge into the building. They could bombard the building from a distance and destroy it entirely.

Based on the distribution of enemy soldiers they received from the satellite, Quenser and the others used their sensors in a variety of ways to check on the details of the people inside.

"This is a pain in the ass. There are over fifty people in there."

"Here we go. On the first floor…what is that place? Looks like an internal medicine examining room. Anyway, I found a child bound with duct tape. Oh, dear. And she has a blindfold, earplugs, and tape over the mouth. Um, I don't see any other abducted children."

"This is the world's least rewarding place to peep. Let's get this over with and peep on our huge-breasted commander's bath."

"Did you know that joke violates the rules regarding classified information?"

The one hundred infantry split into five groups and Quenser's group took their position.

Sewax was still with them.

"So we get a student and a cameraman. How much variation does one unit need?"

"If you don't need me, I'll go set up a parasol and fall asleep. I' m not here because I want to be."

"You all get to show the people back home that their tax money is being well spent. You should be thanking me."

Heivia put up with a headache and spoke into his radio.

"The kid is on the first floor. Everywhere else doesn't matter. You can make the corpses as gory as you want, so use your wall-penetrating rifles to shoot them on my signal."

"Understood. Will you be using your pistols out of concern for the child? Seeing any corpses at all will probably traumatize her, but go to the extra effort if you want."

"There are some lines you don't cross. Then again, deciding where that line is for yourself is getting a bit self-righteous."

Quenser and his group were not bothering with the strictly-guarded entrance.

They instead made their way to the outer wall of the examination room the abducted child was confined in. Quenser placed several Hand Axe plastic explosives on the wall in a systematic fashion. He finished the setup by stabbing electric fuses in.

"I'm ready."

"Just to be sure, the explosion isn't going to blow out the kid's eardrums, is it?"

"We saw she had a blindfold and earplugs, remember? If we handle this well, she won't even see the corpses. So what'll you do, PTA?"

"Tch. Let's do this. On a count of three."

He casually counted down three seconds.

Immediately afterwards, an explosive noise burst out. It had actually been 53 anti-materiel rifles being fired simultaneously, but the timing was so perfect that it sounded like a single explosion.

At the same time, Quenser hit the switch on his radio while pressing against the wall.

The outer wall was blown to pieces and the filthy men inside the room were knocked to the ground. Before the criminals realized what was happening, Heivia and the professional soldiers stepped in and did not hesitate to pull the trigger.

Phase 1 took only five seconds.

Phase 2 was taking out anyone they missed in Phase 1. The existence of some leftovers who had luckily escaped the anti-materiel rifles was proven by short bursts of assault rifle fire.

"Clear?"

"Clear, clear. Help me out here, Quenser. Let's hide the corpses before removing the kid's blindfold. C'mon, Sewax, you help too!!"

"This was a hospital, so is there a mop and bucket anywhere?"

They could not remove the blindfold with corpses lying all over the place, but the duct tape covering the girl's mouth could keep her from breathing. Quenser approached her and gently removed the tape over her mouth.

He expected her to cry.

But she did not.

"Run!! Hurry!!"

He had a very bad feeling.

He belatedly realized her clothes bulged out oddly and he gently lifted them up.

He saw a cell phone and colorful leads.

"You've gotta be kidding me!!" shouted Heivia.

At the same time, someone in a distant place pressed a speed dial button.

Part 9

In that instant, Quenser and Heivia took the complete opposite actions.

In order to escape the blast, Heivia immediately moved backwards. On the other hand, Quenser grabbed the girls shoulders which were duct taped to the chair. He slid her along and threw the girl's small body underneath the examining room's bed.

All the while, Sewax was peering down his viewfinder.

"Wh-what?" asked Heivia as he coughed a bit and leaped behind a steel desk.

The silence was almost painful.

"What the hell!? It isn't detonating!?"

"It's a cell phone!" shouted back Quenser. "A cheap obsolete model is being used for the detonator. There are no indoor antennae in a ghost town like this. The signal sent from here has to reach an antenna in the next town over and then come back the same way. The thick walls of the building and the metal pipes and springs of this bed are enough. As long as it can't pick up the signal, the detonation command can't reach it!!"

As he spoke, he climbed under the bed himself. He pulled a small knife from his survival kit. The girl did not seem to know what was happening to her after suddenly being thrown into that small space. Anyone would be in a similar state with a blindfold and earplugs.

Quenser removed one of the earplugs and spoke gently.

"It's okay. It's okay now. The bomb won't go off."

"R-really?"

She simply sat there blankly, but that was fine for the time being as it made it easier to work.

"Can you get it off?" asked Heivia.

"Did you see this thing? I can neutralize a shitty detonator like this in 45 seconds."

The explosive was homemade TNT and it was attached to her back with duct tape. The detonator, battery, and the like were

mostly located under her arms. They all appeared to have been stolen from construction sites meant to rebuild the country.

"Honestly, is this supposed to be a school bag?"

There were three circuit boards, but two of them were fakes. He cut only the necessary leads with a knife and completely killed the detonator.

"Hey, it's been a minute!"

"Don't be stupid. It only took me thirty seconds to handle the device itself. It's gently removing the duct tape that's taking me so long!!"

The detonator was no longer functioning, so there was no need to remain below the bed. Quenser tossed the duct tape covered bomb out from under the bed and dragged the nine-year-old hostage out.

Heivia let out a breath and spoke into his radio.

"The situation has ended. The hostage is safe. I repeat, the situation has ended! I know it isn't going to happen, but I request some ice-cold non-alcoholic beer and cured ham for when we return. Yeah, I know it isn't happening!!"

"I thought the mission wasn't over until we got back?"

"And call an ambulance. I'm on the verge of punching this annoying-as-hell cameraman!!"

The hostage girl looked around in confusion.

The corpses of the criminal organization had been moved to another room and the room had been quickly mopped, but the dangerous atmosphere filling the room was not so easily eliminated.

Sewax removed the camera's viewfinder from his eye and spoke to Quenser.

"What do we do now? Do you put up posters like the ones you see for lost cats?"

"Don't underestimate the military's intelligence gathering ability. Her parents are probably being invited to the maintenance base just about now. The emotional reunion will take place inside the fence."

The girl then looked up at Quenser.

She may have seen him as the easiest to talk to because he had dealt with the bomb.

"Hey, where are they?"

"Don't worry, don't worry. You'll be with your mother before-…"

"Not that," she said, cutting him off.

The unease in her voice made it seem the incident was not yet over.

"Where are the others?"

Part 10

She had nothing to do.

That was how the princess felt.

No matter how many sensors her first generation Object had, there was no place for such a colossal weapon on a delicate mission to rescue a hostage. If they arrived with too much power, the criminal group could feel cornered enough to kill the hostage.

So now that the mock battle was over, the princess floated face up in a pool.

The maintenance base zone was made up of over one hundred large vehicles, but it did not contain a facility with a large indoor pool. This outdoor facility had been created by taking advantage of the sand underfoot.

Simply put, the soldiers who misbehaved had been given shovels and forced to dig a giant hole, cover its surface with plastic , and pour water in it. That had created a makeshift pool. A nearby sign said "Female soldiers only. Cameras strictly prohibited." The princess was surrounded by off-duty women in swimsuits and they were all splashing each other with water, hitting each other with beach balls, or getting into serious fights.

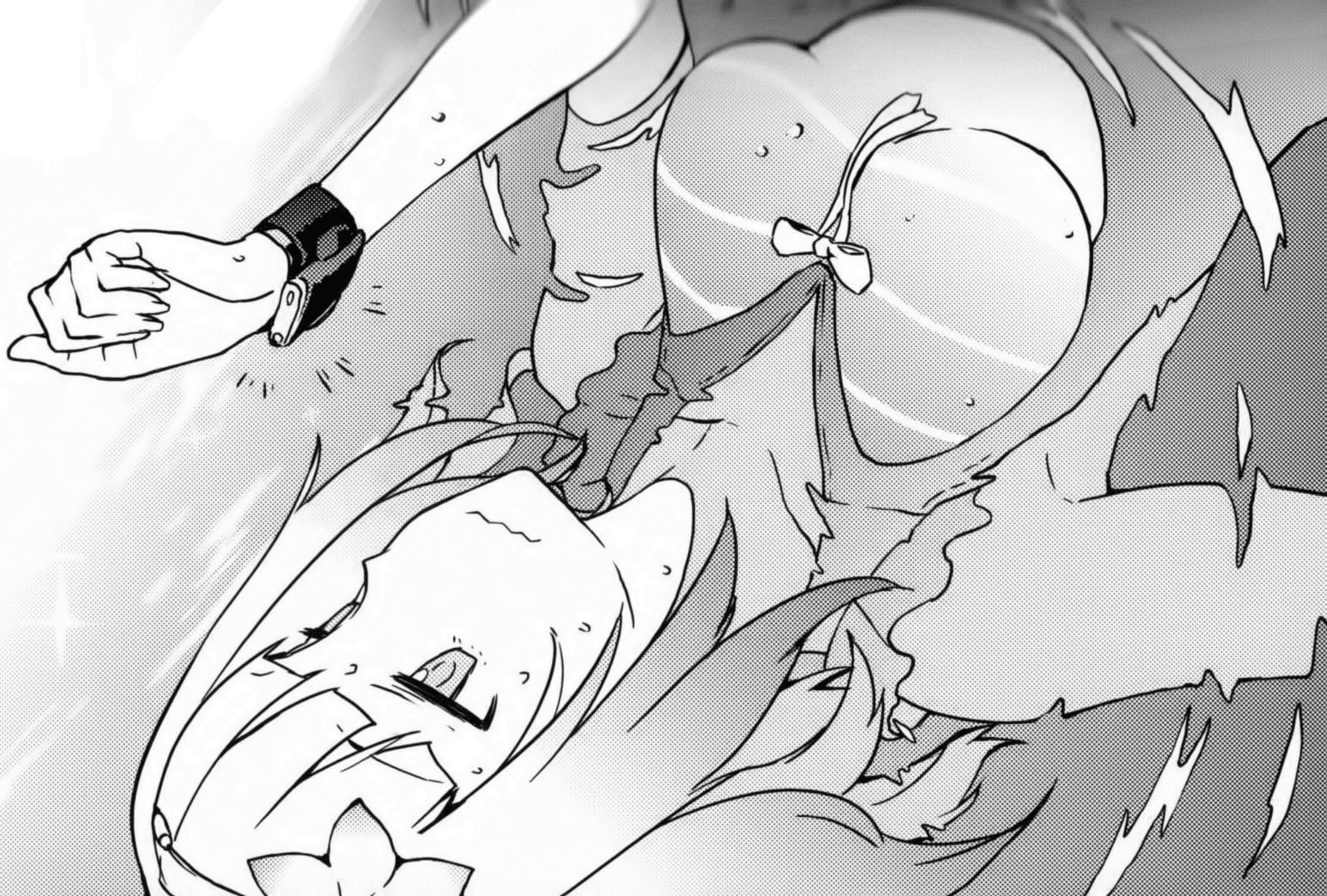
There were two reasons for the pool.

First, it was a project meant to reduce the stress of the female soldiers. It was less about the pool itself and more about providing a small event that allowed them to escape the gaze of the normal military regulations. Similar projects had resulted in events based on different cultural celebrations such as the flower viewing or carnival. There had also been the sudden appearance of a swimsuit-wearing Santa Claus.

Second, it was a means of punishment. It was not fun toiling away under the broiling sun to dig a hole that would be enjoyed by the well-behaved soldiers. It would be no exaggeration to say that over half of the work had been done by a bomb-using student and a radar analyst who excelled at using firearms.

"Sigh…"

And as a result, the princess was wearing a swimsuit and floating in a twenty meter square pool while surrounded by other female soldiers.



And…

"Oh ho ho!! Oh ho ho ho ho!! Honestly, now the unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite is so exhausted she is sighing? You sound like an old woman."

"…Why are you connected to this line?"

The princess had heard an Information Alliance Elite's voice coming from the handheld device attached to her wrist by a rubber bracelet. The princess almost always remained expressionless, but her eyebrows twisted in clear displeasure.

The nice-bodied Elite on the screen was laughing loudly while pressing the back of her hand against her cheek.

"Oh ho ho. Have you never heard of diplomatic routes, little girl? You can disconnect from the line if you like, but a rude Elite would bring disgrace to her unit. Oh ho ho. Then again, you do not look like the kind of girl who would care about that!!"

"I get it, so let's fight. I will blow you to pieces with the Baby Magnum."

"Oh ho ho. Do you really think I am in Oceania? War is not waged solely with unrefined battles. I am currently preparing for a concert. I am too busy to deal with a little girl like you."

"Then why did you contact me."

"I am also steadily preparing to make that gentleman mine."

A cracking sound could be heard.

As the princess grabbed at the handheld device, its waterproof outer case very nearly broke.

"Explain further."

"I don't think so. But do not worry. You will find out in due time"

Having said that, the other Elite ended the transmission.

The princess floated on her back a while longer and looked up at a beach ball flying by above her.

"A concert… Singing…"

She stared blankly up at the blue sky and muttered to herself.

"I should take a photo with Quenser at a karaoke box and show it off to that horrible girl."

A member of the maintenance battalion's intelligence division secretly listened to her.

The reason was quite simple: her mental state was directly linked to the survival of the entire unit!

Part 11

The sky was dyed in the orange of evening.

There was no sign of the murderous sunlight which had been raining down so forcefully before. Once evening came, Oceania filled with darkness quite quickly. After only a few dozen minutes, full darkness would arrive.

"It's a simple setup," said Heivia as he kicked at the abandoned hospital's floor with the heel of his military boot. He sounded truly irritated. "It's human trafficking with no concern for age or sex. This hospital was their relay point or their gathering spot. They abduct innocent people from the nearby cities and carry them out here where the law won't bother them. The police are too afraid to patrol this area much, so they can fully hide their tracks by swapping out their vehicles here."

The kidnapping incident which had started with that wrong number was being treated as resolved. The abducted girl had been loaded aboard a military truck which was taking her to the maintenance base zone.

The only people left in the hospital were Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, and Sewax the battlefield cameraman.

According to the girl, thirty to forty men and women of all ages had been there only about half an hour ago.

Quenser raised his hand.

"Then why call up and demand a ransom? If they're a human trafficking group, they wouldn't need to do that. They would get money by selling her."

"It's probably a secondary source of income. Before selling her to some distant place, they get as much money from the parents as they can. They never intended to give the girl back."

"But who in the world would buy them?" asked Myonri uneasily.

Sewax answered while performing maintenance on his camera.

"Humans are in demand everywhere."

"What I don't get is the variety in age. Whether for organs, soldiers, labor, or a pervert's toy, the younger the better, right? I doubt a criminal organization like that would go out of their way to abduct and sell old men and women."

"They might," replied Sewax without hesitation. "Whether it's people who starved to death or died in a battle, the world wants obvious victims of war. For example, the leaders of a chaotic country without a proper Object system in place needs a way to obtain humanitarian aid from the peaceful countries."

"…Seriously?"

"Humanitarian aid such as food and fuel can be sold for money through the proper routes. And that money can buy guns and mercenaries to tighten one's control over the unsatisfied country that has insufficient supplies. That's one simple way governments oppress their countries with a dictatorship."

"So this is a business that exports 'extras' to play the role of corpses," spat out Quenser.

Heivia frowned.

"But wouldn't it look weird if Oceanians ended up as corpses in other countries?"

"To a certain extent, abducting tourists can help supply people from different regions. There are people like that cameraman who go out of their way to visit dangerous places. If they kidnap a certain number from different regions, they can divide them up to match the requests they receive."

Quenser sounded disgusted by the idea as he spoke, but Sewax' s expression remained calm.

The student wiped sweat from his face with the back of his hand.

"Well, that explains the wide variety of people. If all the corpses were women and children, it might draw more sympathy from the people leisurely watching TV, but they probably want to mix in a macho old man or two to make it all look less contrived."

"That means some of these people are being kidnapped and killed for the same reason as the variation in fighting game rosters. "

"Even if it's a dummy operation, some soldiers might be hesitant to sacrifice their own people. And that goes for

dictatorships, too. But some of that guilt can be eliminated by having them kill people from other nations to protect their own people. After all, that's basically the entire reason the military exists and what soldiers are taught to do."

That was likely what the abductors were after.

Sewax then changed the subject.

"Any guesses where the guns used here came from?"

"They were old-style assault rifles. Not only that, but inferior ones made by melting down scrap metal and reusing it. That's the equipment Oceania used in the days of the military nation," explained Heivia.

"Are remnants of the old military government involved in this? " asked Myonri with a look of disbelief.

Quenser chose his words carefully as he answered.

"Well, I have been hearing about those remnants trying to take back Oceania despite the Objects stationed here giving the coalition forces an overwhelming advantage."

Sewax smiled thinly.

"I've heard they're desperate to set up pipelines to other chaotic regions that are opposed to having Objects rule over them. But to trade, they need products. The old military government's resources have dried up, so they want some kind of diplomatic commodity."

"And that commodity is corpse extras of all ages?" muttered Heivia quietly. "The old government's goal is to retake Oceania. In that case, it does make sense."

"How?"

"They want a way to control people and we've already glimpsed the initial preparations for that."

After thinking for a second, Quenser grimaced.

"The black market."

"It's more of an ally to the people than the convenience stores. Without it, they wouldn't have any food to eat. But not all of the black market's products are gathered by crawling through the rubble. Someone has to obtain funds and buy products to sell."

"Food earned by selling humans," said Myonri with the same look as someone who had found a giant clump of hair in the food they had been eating. "If the people knew the truth, wouldn't they begin to hate the old government's black market?"

"Probably," commented Sewax. "But by that time, the black market will have become an indispensable part of their lives. No matter how much they hate it, they can't escape it. They need to get food and water somehow, so they'll have to approve of what the old government is doing. People have a way of justifying the things they do."

"They're using a cruel incident to wash away the standards of good and evil and of common sense in this country. This is a form of terrorism."

"Screw this," spat out Quenser.

Sewax smiled.

"Fortunately, this is likely the first wave of human trafficking."

"What?"

"I've been keeping an eye on the black market and the stock of products has been pretty unstable. So far, they have probably only had the products they dug up in the rubble. But as the supply began to dwindle, they started to panic. To prevent the people from turning their anger toward a black market without enough to sell, they put together a rushed plan. If they had already been selling people and earning a steady income, the black market would not have been so unstable."

"So what?" Quenser glared at Sewax. "Either way, we need to rescue the Oceanian people who vanished here before they're packed up and shipped away. Thirty people? Forty? They're going to end up as corpse extras. They'll be exported somewhere that doesn't care about the concept of 'clean wars' and they'll end up on some gory picture distributed around the world."

"That's the problem, Quenser." Heivia scratched at his head. " Do you remember what our huge-breasted commander's

justification was? A child was kidnapped and a threatening call was made to a military officer. As a form of self-defense, that officer is sending out her unit to eliminate the criminal organization. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I do. This operation began with that wrong number, so it only applies to the girl from the phone call. Now that we've rescued her, we have no pretext for military action!!"

"Then what do we do? Are we just going to leave those people to their fate!?"

"I don't want to be plagued by nightmares of lines of body bags every time I go to bed, but this is a different issue entirely!"

"Either way, Froleytia will receive the same report once the girl arrives at the maintenance base. No matter what we do, the unit will take action in the end. So is there any reason to let the number of body bags grow by waiting until that delayed action begins!?"

"At least get permission!! Acting like a hero is great and all, but I don't want to be thrown behind bars in exchange for getting a statue made of me in a safe country!!"

Sewax let out an obvious sigh and interrupted the following silence.

"Let's go over the situation. You just finished your mission and were about to return to the maintenance base zone. You are not

allowed to make a preemptive strike on a local force, but you are permitted to fight back in self-defense in the case of an unexpected battle. Is all that correct?"

"Are you telling us to say we lost our bearings in the desert and happened across the abduction organization while driving around randomly?"

"That's a terrible excuse! That huge-breasted commander of ours would kill us!!"

"Only if we shot at them and killed them," said Quenser as he gathered his thoughts. "But we should be able to get by if we restrict ourselves to investigation and long-distance reconnaissance. The odds are good Froleytia will act once she hears what that girl has to say. Even if we only investigate what buildings we need to attack and where the people are inside, it might change how many people we can save."

"You sure are optimistic. What if she doesn't act? Even if they're a criminal organization, they still count as civilians. If she can't justify slaughtering them with the military, there's nothing she can do."

"If that happens…" Quenser paused there, threw off his hesitation, and finally continued. "Then we'll have to resign ourselves to being thrown in the detention barracks."

Part 12

There was a proper way to go about reconnaissance.

And Quenser, Heivia, and the others did not have the proper equipment.

So…

"Who would have thought we would get our equipment at their black market?"

"I kind of think it's our own fault."

They bought military reconnaissance equipment centered on parabolic microphones and laser bugging devices. They also made sure to negotiate them all down to half the asking price. Unlike normal souvenir shops, the night was the busiest time for the black market. The hot night produced an odd passion in people which intertwined with the heat and filled the air with an oppressive atmosphere that permeated one's body.

"I'm burning up… I thought the desert was supposed to be cold at night."

"This area is filled with concrete, so it gathers heat like an urban heat island."

"All these lights are outdated incandescent bulbs and everyone's using diesel generators. I wonder if that's adding to it."

Quenser was in charge of haggling.

He was knowledgeable about machines and had a better sense of what things were worth due to his life as a commoner.

"I'm afraid of running into one of those Black Uniform women who were sent to the maintenance base. If they found out about this, they'd shoot us on the spot without bothering with a court martial."

"How about we buy some uniforms, too? They have Information Alliance and Capitalist Corporations ones here."

"Be my guest. But if anyone finds out, it'll cause an international incident. Personally, I'm not gonna start a war."

As a drunk was beaten by some of the shop owners for using shoddy counterfeit money, they bought some bottles of cider and other drinks stuck in a cooler of ice and received a radio transmission from Sewax.

They had asked Myonri and Sewax to gather some general information ahead of time.

"In an unstable country like this, the currencies of safe countries are popular. It's a bit frustrating that the Capitalist Corporations' dollars are better received than the Legitimacy Kingdom's euros, but I got some interesting information."

"Damn, it's gone flat."

"What?"

"Just talking to myself," said Heivia evasively. "So did you come across some bottom-level member of the criminal organization?"

"I didn't go that far. I talked with some of the people working in the rubble called the Mouth of Truth. To help the country recover, a few of the docks at the international harbor are opened to the general public, but it seems one of them is being monopolized by a shell corporation. If they were transporting something they wanted to hide, they wouldn't need to do that."

"Do you have any proof the corpse extras are being shipped out there?"

"Not if ordering a few dozen more fast food hamburgers than usual doesn't qualify as proof. It seems they also carried in a bunch of water and salt."

Heivia and Quenser exchanged a glance.

"So once they've eaten, they get stuffed in a container for the long cruise?"

"If they just stuff in them in like that, will they really make it to the destination?"

"That depends on where they're being sent," replied Sewax. " My guess is half would die during the first two weeks and a tenth of the survivors would die off each day afterwards."

That guess was anything but funny.

The criminal organization was not selling cheap laborers or toys for perverts. They were selling extras to play the role of corpses. Selling them alive would be best, but they could be sold at a

reduced price if they were frozen after they died. When a corpse was gruesomely roasted, you didn't have to worry about rigor mortis or anything like that. It was possible an autopsy wouldn't even be performed.

"I also got my hands on a map of the harbor. I have a few guesses where the 'products' will be loaded, but I don't know for sure. We need to go see for ourselves."

"Well, we can't use the military satellite without restriction," said Heivia.

"We know the shortest course, so having to take such a roundabout route is just plain exhausting," added Quenser.

Each time the two boys bought another piece of junk, they crossed off another item on their list.

"It looks like we'll be able to get everything we need. Is there anything you want us to get outside of the standard reconnaissance equipment?" they asked Sewax.

"A beautiful blonde, a barrel of sherry, brandy that's at least eight years old, cigars without any unnecessary filters, and a villa with a pool," said Sewax perfectly casually. "Oh, and a bow and arrow set."

"?"

Part 13

The international harbor in question was located at one end of the city of rubble known as the Mouth of Truth.

Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, and Sewax stopped their military vehicle on the road three kilometers from the harbor and stepped out onto the cracked asphalt.

The abandoned buildings with no lights looked a lot different than they had during the day.

No flashlight lights could be seen in the direction of the abandoned buildings. Either searching for trash in the dark was too inefficient or they would simply be attacked if they dug anything out.

"This area is so bad they have to gather junk, so should we really leave our vehicle here? I don't want to return exhausted from the job and find our means of transportation gone."

"After the attack today, the people of the slum aren't going to pick a fight with the military for at least half a day."

Quenser and Sewax carried the reconnaissance equipment while Heivia and Myonri carried the firearms as they walked toward the international harbor that was opened to the public to help the country recover.

"If you look at it the right way, war recovery is like a tree that grows money," complained Heivia as he wiped sweat from his brow. "And with all this equipment being moved around, people are gonna show up to take it for themselves. No one else is here,

there are tons of things to hide behind, and there are any number of great spots for an attack. I can see why this area is so dangerous."

"Are the containers shipped by land attacked because it's a dangerous area or did it become a dangerous area because it's a land route on which containers are shipped? It's a bit of a chicken and the egg question," said Sewax smoothly.

Quenser and the others did not directly enter the harbor. It was surrounded by a chain-link fence and armed workers were patrolling it. Opening the harbor up unconditionally would allow people to smuggle in weapons and drugs, so this was no surprise.

"This place is being used by human traffickers, so they're not doing a very good job," muttered Heivia as he hid behind some rubble.

"Just to be clear, don't shoot them," said Quenser in annoyance. "They're just normal local people."

"I know that, you idiot. But the villains might've bought some of them out. If this comes down to a fight, I'm classifying them as yellow. I won't kill them, but I'll incapacitate them."

As an international harbor, it was quite a large place. It continued for two or three kilometers along the concrete-hardened coast. Also, about half of it had been destroyed in a fierce battle. A giant crane had broken and sunk into the ocean, and some giant metal boxes piled up in the container yard had collapsed and spread out like an avalanche.

"Myonri, where's the dock we're interested in?"

"N-number nine. From what we heard at least."

Collapsed and broken buildings were lined up along the outside of the harbor. Quenser and the other three entered one of the abandoned buildings that was half-buried in the sand and climbed the stairs. They found a window overlooking the entire dock and hid by pressing up against the wall.

"Honestly, this building isn't going to suddenly collapse, is it?"

"I'm afraid of asbestos, too. Was this thing actually made safely ?"

The two idiots continued to complain back and forth.

"They've got someone famous here," muttered Sewax flatly as he looked down at the dock with binoculars. "See that big man with a scar on his cheek and a false finger on his right hand? He looks like someone the major newspapers are giving an award for information on. He's probably the man known as Blue Bottle."

"Who's that?" asked Quenser honestly.

"I think I heard the intelligence division whispering about that," said Heivia in annoyance. "They were saying something about an unofficial mission to assassinate a courier that's been making tons of money and controlling the market in Oceania by slipping past

the satellites and inspections. They mentioned giving out tons of guest IDs to the maintenance base in preparation to invite in a specialized assassination team."

"Wait a second. I thought we were in charge of wars. Aren't we supposed to leave things like this to the local police?"

"There are always exceptions and some people force us to make an exception. The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization are all fighting over their own interests here in Oceania, but no one is going to welcome a criminal who causes damage to everyone equally."

"Hm." Quenser did not seem to understand very well. "So why is he called Blue Bottle? Does he roll up his money and carry it around in blue bottles?"

Sewax shrugged.

"It's the name of a jellyfish. A poisonous one. Apparently, more people in Oceania die from jellyfish than from sharks. He got the name because of how he does business while slipping through the nets like a ghost."

That meant the criminal organization led by Blue Bottle was heavily related to the human trafficking and the black market.

"Oh, oh. You can tell at a glance." Heivia let out a whistle as he peered out with binoculars. "Those clearly aren't harbor workers. Look at those giant assault rifles. I'm guessing there's between 50 and 90 of them."

"Eh? I can only see about 20 out there."

"But they'll have two or three shifts, so that makes 50 to 90. A soccer team isn't made up of exactly eleven people, you know?"

"Hey, Heivia. Is it possible these are harbor workers who were given money and equipment?"

"Not a chance. Their complexion is different. The tone of your skin can change a lot in a short period of time, but the brightness of the whites of your eyes won't change in just a week or a month. Based on what they've been eating, they're clearly higher up on the hierarchy. These aren't people hired for the day. We aren't gonna kill them and find out they were normal civilians."

In other words, they did not need to hold back.

Quenser looked back and forth between the map Sewax had spread out on the dusty floor and the actual dock outside the window.

"The first question is where Blue Bottle's group is keeping their 'merchandise'," he said. "It looks like there's a mid-sized cargo ship docked here."

He pointed toward the ship loaded with the standard metal containers.

But Sewax immediately rejected the idea.

"They're not on the ship. The lifespans of the humans is directly linked to temperature and humidity. They'll wait until the last second to load them in the containers. It's just like shipping fruit. They'll last longer this way."

In that case, they could also rule out the hundreds of containers in the container yard.

If all of those were options, they might very well have had to give up.

"Then where are they?"

"Look at where the soldiers are, student." Heivia tapped Quenser on the shoulder and pointed out the window with his chin. "They're at the exits, the points needed to look out for snipers , and on top of the cranes instead of lookout towers. All of those are standard spots you'll find in any textbook, but some of the soldiers are in clearly inefficient places. Those are to prevent any escapees. The 'merchandise' is within that office."

"Probably," agreed Sewax. "It has a roof to block out the sun and an air conditioner to prevent heat stroke. More importantly, it

has four walls to prevent escape. And they don't have to worry about anyone spotting the shocking fact that they're holding people captive."

Quenser started to agree, but then he frowned.

He looked out the window once more.

"The outer fence isn't far from it. If they shouted, their voice could get out. Doesn't that give them a chance to escape?"

"And what would they do then?" Heivia grinned cruelly. "This is a deserted city. Everyone digging for junk is working for the black market. They won't actively take part in the human trafficking, but they'll keep quiet if Blue Bottle yells at them."

"What about the harmless harbor workers?"

"They have to pass through the empty city to get back home alive. Do you really think they'll cause any unnecessary trouble?"

With that said, Heivia made a sign toward Myonri.

He then tapped on Quenser's shoulder.

"What was that?"

"You're working with the military, so how about you try to learn our language?"

Quenser and Heivia left the abandoned building, leaving Myonri and Sewax inside. They crouched down and made their way along while hiding behind concrete rubble in the road.

Quenser looked confused when he saw what Heivia was holding.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"The office with the 'merchandise' inside isn't far from the fence . You're the one that pointed that out, Quenser."

They approached almost all the way to the fence and stopped about 100 meters form the office. They could not approach any further. If they poked their heads out from behind the rubble, a firefight would begin with Blue Bottle's criminal organization.

Needless to say, a battle with a metal fence in between would put Quenser and Heivia at a disadvantage when they were trying to rescue the abducted people.

The office was a two-story building made of reinforced concrete . The staircase was attached to the outside of the building.

All of the first floor windows had the blinds lowered, so they could not see inside.

But on the second floor…

"There we go," muttered Quenser with binoculars in one hand. "I see an old woman. She's probably about 80. Now that's another

kind of person who will make you want to protect them. She's perfect for one of their extras, dammit."

"Not again! Can we please run across a large-breasted waitress or beautiful secretary in a business suit!? I need some kind of motivation here!!"

"More importantly," said Quenser in annoyance. "She's the only one I can see from here. There's supposed to be around thirty of them, right? Where are the others? I hope they aren't locked up separately."

Suddenly, Sewax spoke up over the radio.

"That's probably where they're being fed their last supper."

"What?"

"The abducted people will be packed in containers and shipped across the ocean. How long they survive is influenced by temperature, humidity, and food supply."

Quenser turned his binoculars back toward the second floor of the office.

The small old woman was sitting in a chair by the window. The round table contained a hamburger and fries from a fast food restaurant as well as a cup filled with soda.

"After being packed in the container, they have to subsist off of water and salt," continued Sewax. "If they gave them proper food, it would quickly rot in the high temperature and high humidity.

That's why they have them eat as much as they can ahead of time to maintain the freshness of their 'merchandise'."

"And so they would be in trouble if the people went on a hunger strike?"

"Even if they forced them to eat at gunpoint, the extreme stress could make them vomit, ruining the whole idea. That's why they give them some hope. They're in a comfortable air-conditioned room, the outer fence isn't far away, and they have a nice view from the second floor window. The people are made to think they might be able to escape and so they need to eat to keep their strength up. Once they eat of their own free will, they can be shipped out."

The small old woman had food in front of her, but she showed no sign of eating it. She simply hung her head down while sitting in the chair. The hamburger had grown cold and the grease from the fries had stained their container. Quenser could not guess how long she had been sitting there.

"She knows it's over once she eats."

"Damn them. It's been a while since I saw food less appetizing than our rations."

With that offhand comment, Heivia began assembling the military bow behind the rubble. It was a reinforced version of an athletic bow and it was covered in desert camouflage.

"Hey, are we really going to do this with so few people? If we know where all the abducted people are, Froleytia might take action."

"I'm not going to use this to kill anyone, Mr. Happy. The second-story window is 100 meters away. If I aim high, the arrow will fall through the window. It doesn't make much noise, so the guards wandering around outside won't notice."

Quenser realized what Heivia meant, so he scratched at his sand-filled blond hair.

"Are you going to shoot a radio to that old woman?"

"The arrows come with transmitters already. They're meant to tell an Object where to fire, but with some quick modifications, we can communicate over it."

"Who's going to modify it?"

"If you want to prove your worth, you'd better get busy, Quenser. Taking apart some headphones and removing the oscillator is easier than disarming a bomb."

"And who's going to pay me?"

"Come to think of it, I don't have an answer for that either! Why the hell am I taking this so seriously!?"

Without a soldering iron or wire cutters, Quenser had to pull a small knife meant for cooking from his survival kit. He used the

knife to take apart the electronic device and combine the necessary parts. His movements were broad but accurate, so he looked a bit like a cook on a fishing ship.

After putting together the arrow, Quenser handed it to Heivia.

"How's the window?"

"It's open. They probably have the air conditioner on inside, but the open window increases the people's hope."

"You only have one shot at this. Are you sure you can get it in the room first try?"

"Easily, once I pass it through a ballistic calculation program. How about I fire it right into the hamburger on the table?"

"You got something that dangerous? Should that really be out on the black market?"

"Don't be silly. This is for golf lovers. It just so happens you can also use it to provide targeting corrections for mortars is all."

"So it's like using the club to break open an ATM and take out the money?"

"This is another difference between the rich and the poor. There are people who have to dig through the black market and haggle for food, but there are others who build a green golf course in the desert for fun. Otherwise, something like this wouldn't be there."

The ballistic calculation program worked by attaching a handheld device to the bow's grip and looking into a small screen. The footage from the camera would add lines along courses for baseball pitches.

It was almost all sports-related.

He held the bow up and fired a large arrow. It silently passed over the head of a guard, travelled in an arc, fell diagonally down toward the office's second story window, and shot accurately into the room.

Just like the flag on a kid's meal, the arrow stabbed into the center of the hamburger on the table.

"Heh. Did you see that, Quenser? That's what the super smart, beautiful, and wealthy noble Heivia can do. You don't get a hole-in-one by relying on beginner's luck. You need the skill and composure of a gentleman."

"You idiot, you scared the old woman so much she fell over backwards in her chair! And weren't you saying anyone could do this using that ballistic whatever?"

"If you're gonna be like that, then why don't you try it! You always leave the physical labor to me!!"

The two idiots very nearly started a light fistfight, but they remembered this was hardly the time. They would be fine if the panicked old woman fell silent from the shock, but they would lose their chance if she caused a commotion.

Quenser set the frequency on his radio and brought it to his mouth.

The modified arrow had the oscillator and electrode from some headphones added on, so they could communicate via their voices. Specifically, the amplitude of the vibrations in the air could be converted to electrical signals of 0 and 1. Simply put, it worked the same as a telephone.

"Hey there. This is Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage from the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. If that's too much of a mouthful, you can call me hero or knight. I'd like to take the position of the red-clad hero, but unfortunately, my uniform only has the plain colors of desert camouflage."

"No fair!! You're acting like this was all your doing!"

"Sorry, Heivia, but I'll do anything for the slightest chance of seeing a wonderful micro bikini once this old woman introduces me to her daughter or granddaughter. …In fact, I'd probably just roll over and go to sleep if I didn't have that hope."

"Why do you think I said it wasn't fair!?"

The two idiots almost began grappling, but something happened over the radio. The old woman timidly approached the arrow stabbed into the table (through the hamburger).

"A-are you a soldier?"

"That's right. Do you watch the news on TV? We're from the coalition army. We're the cavalry that'll do anything from road construction to eliminating bad guys."

"Do you have a gun? Are you different from the people wandering around outside?"

"Piano, violin, foreign languages, and dance. There are a lot of things for ladies to learn, but there is one thing they have to remember no matter how old they are. Do you know what that is?"

"…?"

"How to spot a decent guy. Being able to do that can change your entire life. How about I give you an example, 'young lady'? After this, you'll think the world isn't completely lost as long as there's one attractive guy left."

For a while after that, they heard the old woman say nothing more.

It was not that the transmission had cut out.

They heard intermittent breaths as if from sobbing mixed in with a bit of static.

As he monitored the dock from the abandoned building, Sewax explained what was going on over Heivia's radio.

"It looks like she's crying."

"You don't have to report every little thing like that," said Heivia sharply.

He and Quenser continued to wait while hiding behind the rubble.

"I feel like smoking a cigarette right about now."

"You're a minor. What are you talking about?"

They waited for thirty seconds or maybe a full minute.

When the old woman spoke once more, they took it as a sign they could continue.

"What should I do?" she asked. "How can I sneak out of here?"

"First, how about we get your name, 'young lady'. I'm Quenser, but what should I call you?"

"Dorothy."

"Also…I know. What about your home? We need to send you back there once we rescue you."

"South Britain territory."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

They had been expecting an Oceanian city, but Dorothy had mentioned a Legitimacy Kingdom safe country.

"Were you…a tourist?"

"Yes. My daughter and her husband were visiting a shopping mall. All the bright lights made me dizzy, so I stayed in the car. But it got as hot as a greenhouse under the sun and I couldn't bear it any longer, so…"

"(What do you think?)"

"(I'd say it's about 50/50 whether that's a justification. Civilian lives always take priority over military personnel and equipment, but we haven't actually checked to see if Dorothy is a Legitimacy Kingdom citizen.)"

Heivia let out a short sigh and poked just the barrel of his assault rifle from behind the rubble. Technically, he was sticking out the sensors attached to the rifle.

"(There are three guards circling the office. If we sniped the high points to the west and southwest, it would be possible break in, but…)"

Sewax continued for Heivia.

"But it would be risky. And we would have to give up on rescuing the others because we don't know where they are."

"We have two options," said Quenser while choosing his words carefully. He was speaking to Dorothy who was closest to the information they needed. "We can rescue you for sure or we can leave you there a little longer to figure out where the other thirty or forty abducted people are."

"…"

"We can't choose either option without your cooperation. You stand in the most important place, so you can make the decision. …Which do you want to do?"

"I will do it," said Dorothy after thinking for a moment. "Please let me do it. Until you gave me this chance, I could not even taste the food, but now I am human again. And now that I know how wonderful this chance is, I cannot bear to take that chance from the others in my position."

"Just to be clear, that option will increase the risk. You might be wasting this chance you've been given. Will you still do it for people you don't even know?"

"I do know them. We were thrown in a truck together and trembled together as they aimed guns at us. That may be all, but I do know them."

For a moment, Quenser was unsure what to say into the radio.

He could not decide which option was correct.

But he still said it.

There was no reason to let her know about his own doubts.

"An excellent answer."

"What do I need to do?" she asked.

Quenser turned toward Heivia. His friend handed him the same type of arrow he had just fired into the office window.

Quenser held the radio between his cheek and shoulder while he used both hands to disassemble the metal arrow.

"The arrow stabbed into the table there is made so the back can be removed. Twist it like a screw and a ballpoint pen sized part should come off.

"Yes, yes. Do I need to tell you were everyone is with this?"

"No, you don't need to say anything. We can tell where that ballpoint pen is. Dorothy, you just have to hide it in your clothes and follow the criminal's instructions. Before all of you are sent aboard the ship, you should be gathered in a single spot. As long as we know where that is, we can use the power of the military to take control of the harbor."

"I see…"

"You can't let them know you have that hidden under your clothes. As for the rest of the arrow…I know. There's an air conditioner near the ceiling, right? Use something as a stepstool and place it on top of the air conditioner. Eat the hamburger and… Oh, there's a hole in the table, isn't there? There's a chair in that office, right? Pretend the stress got the better of you and beat the chair against the table to destroy it. Make sure they won't notice that small hole!"

After giving all of his instructions, Quenser ended the transmission and tapped Heivia's shoulder.

"Let's go."

"Sure, sure. You're taking all the good parts, aren't you!? Are you the type that'll talk to anyone you lay your eyes on, whether they're a trap or a zombie girl?"

"We would lose too much time if we waited until Dorothy gave us our answer to request assistance from Froleytia. We need to get the unit moving now."

"How? Unless we give a justification for the military to act and prove that we can win, that huge-breasted commander will only yell at us. We'll be stuck waiting for word from lovely little Dorothy. You haven't escaped the delay."

"Dorothy will give us the right answer." Quenser raised his index finger. "But Froleytia and the others don't know when. We

can report that we've found the abducted people ahead of time and everything will fall into place as long as Dorothy gives us the answer before the unit arrives."

"Are you aware providing false reports is a crime?"

"I'll pretend I don't. After all, I'm just a student."

"Hah hah. That's no different from when council members say they 'have no recollection' of people's accusations. It won't work."

Quenser and Heivia were beginning to relax because of the difference in military might. The harbor dock was controlled by bad guys who were armed with old assault rifles and grenades, but that would be easily dealt with as soon as Froleytia sent in the power of the military.

For them, they were on the verge of having a legit military operation.

Dorothy was a Legitimacy Kingdom citizen and she would provide them the location of the others before long.

That was enough.

Froleytia would complain, but she would send in some soldiers. She might beat up the two idiots afterwards and they could even be thrown in the detention barracks, but that would be after everything had been settled.

With one word of approval, Dorothy and the others would be saved.

Quenser and Heivia had no more reason to stay there. A battle would begin if Blue Bottle's criminal organization spotted them before they had Dorothy's answer and the unit arrived, but that was the worst case scenario. They could prevent that from happening by leaving the rubble nearby the harbor and returning to the building Myonri and Sewax were in.

With that in mind, the two of them began to stand up.

And then a voice spoke from the radio.

It was Sewax.

"Wait a minute."

"What? What is it? Did god finally decide to show some pity on me by dropping a supermodel from the sky?"

Sewax ignored Heivia's casual comment as he continued.

"Something isn't right."

Part 14

Quenser and Heivia could not believe what Sewax said over the radio.

To check for themselves, they rushed back to the abandoned building. They pressed up against the wall next to the window overlooking the harbor and swiped Sewax's binoculars.

Without looking particularly displeased, the cameraman pointed toward one side of the harbor.

A mid-sized cargo ship was moored at the dock. A short pole was located near the bow of the ship.

"You've gotta be kidding me! Please tell me this is a joke!!"

Heivia clenched his teeth and checked through the binoculars again and again, but what he saw did not change. It was no mistake.

"Come to think of it, some of this didn't quite add up," groaned Sewax. "Blue Bottle's criminal organization may control one portion of the harbor with a shell company, but the coalition still has several naval Objects patrolling the ocean. The cargo ships would naturally undergo surprise checks. Anyone shipping out weapons, drugs, counterfeit money, humans, or anything else suspicious would need to control more than just the harbor to be safe."

Then what did they need to be safe?

The answer was displayed on the bow of the cargo ship.

"To hell with them." Quenser brought a hand to his forehead. "I can see it! Yeah, I can see it! That's the Information Alliance flag fluttering in the wind on that pole!!"

"Does that mean the Information Alliance is involved in this human trafficking?" asked Myonri.

Sewax shook his head.

"Most likely, they aren't checking what's onboard at all. The soldiers just give the ships a free pass in exchange for money."

"That's just the excuse they'll use to prevent a war if there's a problem and this comes to light. It's no different than the politicians who insist their secretary was behind it all," said Heivia in annoyance. "I doubt the Information Alliance is interested in the human trafficking itself. Even if it's profitable, it would hurt their reputation too much. I bet they're interested in the criminal organization that has worked its way so deeply into Oceania. Their black market is directly linked to the livelihood of the people. If they can make a connection with Blue Bottle and form a pipeline to the criminal organization, they can freely manipulate public opinion within Oceania. This lets them create pressure both officially and unofficially. If they can gain the support of the local people, they can gain an advantage in the coalition's infighting over how much of this southern continent each world power gets."

"Probably, but if we accuse them on nothing but speculation, we'll be the ones left hurting." Quenser clicked his tongue. "More importantly, what about Dorothy!? As long as the criminal organization is receiving this indulgence from the Information Alliance, they officially count as cooperating with the Information Alliance military. Froleytia won't want to attack them blindly!!"

"So they're technically civilians yet are partially treated like soldiers." Sewax seemed to be thinking. "Yes, it would cause a lot of trouble if a large unit was sent in to annihilate them. The Information Alliance could easily cause a much larger battle in the

name of stopping the Legitimacy Kingdom from unrightfully attacking civilians."

"Our huge-breasted commander can't do anything," spat out Heivia. "She isn't stupid enough to start a war over thirty or forty people! But then what do we do!? If we could use the proper channels and send in a large unit, they'd be crushed in five seconds, but does that mean the four of us can defeat them? It's impossible! Especially if we have to swiftly and accurately wipe them out so they can't take away the abducted people!!"

"Wait, where's Dorothy? We can contact her and save at least her."

"We can't!" Quenser kicked the floor. "The communications device we gave her has moved to another building. That's probably where all the others are being held. Breaking in and rescuing just her isn't an option anymore."

Attempting an unwinnable battle would help nothing.

Making a heroic and moving charge on the harbor might reduce the number of bad guys, but they would eventually be overwhelmed and defeated. There was even a danger of the criminals shooting the captives.

Now that they knew Blue Bottle's criminal organization was under the Information Alliance's protection, they could only say a political problem had arisen. The criminals could claim this was an unofficial operation meant to let these people escape the poor conditions of Oceania and reach wealthier nations. The dead could

say nothing, so they only had to kill all of the captives within the containers and claim it would never have happened if the Legitimacy Kingdom had not taken hasty military action.

At best, it would start as an argument between the higher ups of the two world powers and develop into a war.

At worst, Quenser and the other three would be treated as war criminals who slaughtered the civilians.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do." Heivia covered his face with his hands and let a heavy voice escape the gaps between his fingers. "They set this up too well! Of course they did!! They've spent a long time building this up so it would be safe. Why would some people who just now showed up be able to ad-lib their way through it!?"

"Then what do we do about Dorothy?"

"Weren't you listening? We can't start a war over thirty or forty people!"

"But I was the one that asked her to help! I can't accept this. We're not watching a news broadcast about something happening on the other side of the world!!"

"Then you go fight on your own! As a student, you might be able to slip through the cracks of the war treaties. But you'll be slaughtered by the criminals. And more importantly!! That criminal organization is being treated like a group cooperating with the Information Alliance military. You're not just up against

some thugs in the city. You'll be taking on an international military force here. Are you still going to pick a fight with them!?"

Heivia heard a light noise.

It was Quenser snapping his fingers.

"That's it."

"What? …No, wait just a damn second. What the hell are you thinking? Why are you grinning like that? I was in the middle of shouting at you until you gave up!"

"Military cooperators. Heivia, soldiers have a duty to rescue civilians in that position, right?"

"So what if they do? I don't see how you can twist that into keeping the Information Alliance away. If we attack Blue Bottle and his human trafficking ring, they're gonna show up. There's no stopping it!!"

The female soldier named Myonri then cut in timidly.

"Huh? Wait a minute. Then that means…"

"Dorothy has no reason to fight." Quenser pointed toward his own chest with his thumb. "It was me, someone working for the Legitimacy Kingdom military! If I hadn't pressed her to cooperate, she wouldn't still be there in the middle of enemy territory. That means she's cooperating with the Legitimacy Kingdom military. It's obvious her life is in danger if we don't do something, so what should the military that was backing her do? Answer me, Heivia!!"

"You've gotta be kidding me," groaned Heivia.

"I see." Sewax's lips twisted up in an interested smile. "If Blue Bottle's organization is protected by the Information Alliance as a military cooperator, then they can't ignore the Legitimacy Kingdom if it claims the right to protect Dorothy for the same reason. If conflict breaks out between civilians, it's only natural for the militaries backing them to intermediate."

"Don't make me laugh." Heivia shook his head. "There's no way it'll work that well! There isn't going to be a tear-jerking happy ending! Our huge-breasted commander doesn't know we hired Dorothy and she won't approve of it! We don't have any documents to prove it, either!! When war is about to break out, try bringing up someone named Dorothy that no one's ever heard of. They'll just stare at you funny. Justification or not, our unit isn't moving!!"

"Perhaps not," admitted Quenser. "But we do have justification for the four of us to take action."

"Do you have anything to prove she's a military cooperator!?"

"She's proof enough. But she needs to be alive to prove it, so we have to save her."

"What we want to do and what we have to do match up," muttered Sewax.

They could act as heroic as they wanted, but they were the ones who would be exposed to gunfire. Heivia was growing irritated because the fear was beginning to sink in, so Quenser spoke to him .

"Also, we can't run away anymore."

"What!? Why the hell not!? There's no special bonus waiting for us. It's not like we have to shoot our way out to get back to the maintenance base. In fact, we shouldn't even be here. For once, I'm having trouble finding anything we'll get blamed for if we just run away!!"

"And then what? Are we going to report that we recruited a civilian without permission, didn't see it through to the end, and returned to safety while leaving her to die? Even if it doesn't break any rules, do you really think there will be a place for us back in the unit?"

"Goddammit!! So you convince Dorothy to do this and now it's going to bring dishonor on *me*? This'll affect my chances of inheriting my family!!"

But arguing was not going to solve anything.

If he truly had an issue with what Quenser had done, he should have interrupted while Quenser was speaking with Dorothy.

"But what now? What exactly do we do!? There're only four of us and two of those are a student and cameraman. Meanwhile, we'

re up against 50-90 soldiers and there might be reinforcements from the Information Alliance. That's too much of a difference to just charge in randomly like we're the cavalry!"

"Our objective is to rescue Dorothy and the other captives. All of them. We aren't just going to shoot up the place until nothing's left moving like in a Western."

"What?"

"We need to narrow down our targets. This is like a puzzle game. We don't have to take care of everything ourselves. If we destroy one, the rest will vanish in a chain reaction."

Part 15

The most important factor was that Quenser and the others knew where Dorothy was. They could detect her location from the communication device removed from the military arrow and hidden in her clothes.

After detecting that she had been moved to the mid-sized cargo ship, Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, and Sewax began to move.

"Honestly. This is no joke," groaned Heivia. "We have no boat. We have no flippers or snorkels! We have nothing!! And now we have to jump into the ocean at night? We're carrying rifles and missiles!! It's all so damn heavy I just want to throw it away!!"

"The ship is leaving the harbor while you waste time shouting. Let's jump in while we can catch up."

They had left the dock controlled by Blue Bottle's criminal organization and entered a block patrolled by the normal harbor workers. Instead of the main gate, they had cut a hole in the chain-link fence and snuck in. After slipping past the guards and cutting across the harbor, they threw themselves into the dark ocean at the tip of the harbor.

"Bwah! Dammit! They have a diesel engine. Can we really catch up to them like this?"

"The sea chart here is complex," replied Sewax while skillfully treading water. He seemed to have no problem with being in the water, so his camera must have been waterproof. "A lot of rubble from Object bombardments has been swept into the ocean. This is worse than reefs. To safely reach open sea, they have to travel back and forth in an S-shape. If we swim along that route, the cargo ship will approach us."

"The Information Alliance is in charge of security here and I hear they've blocked the sea routes with smart mines that distinguish between friend and foe. I don't know if they'll react to a human-sized mass, but try to be careful."

After swimming through the dark sea for a while, the cargo ship came into view. As it travelled along the narrow safe regions, it did indeed approach them.

"Wait, wait, wait. It's pointing searchlights everywhere."

"They're probably actually relying on radar, but human nature makes them want to see everything with their own eyes. But it's

dark below the lights. The bright light will cause their pupils to contract incorrectly. As long as the light doesn't directly illuminate you, they won't see you," explained Sewax.

"Heivia, do you have the rope ready?" asked Quenser.

"Just as you asked, Mr. Knight! Once again, I prepare the food and you get to eat it!!"

As it approached, the cargo ship's hull rose up like a cliff. It also tilted out toward them, so it would be impossible climb by hand.

Heivia and Myonri spun around ropes with claws attached to the end and used the centrifugal force to throw them straight up. After making sure they had solidly dug into the deck's railing, the two soldiers climbed up the cliff and onto the ship.

The cargo ship itself was a giant mass with a large volume.

As Quenser and Sewax waited in the sea for their signal, they were tossed around by the artificial current and forced to cling to the ropes.

And then something heavy fell down from above.

Quenser looked down at what had fallen next to him and found the corpse of one of the criminal organization's guards. The man's throat had been slit.

With a look of disgust, he brought his radio to his mouth.

"You show no mercy, do you?"

"If you have time to complain, climb up. Sharks are sensitive to the scent of blood."

But Quenser was only a student, so he could not climb what was essentially a building wall using only a rope.

Quenser glanced over at Sewax who quickly surmounted the wall on his own, but he needed Heivia and Myonri to pull his rope up.

"C'mon. I'm a noble and you're a commoner, so I shouldn't be pulling you up like this."

"More importantly, how much time do we have?"

"They'll figure out they've lost someone once the periodic report comes, so we have at most ten minutes. We have no time to spare after losing some time thanks to a certain idiot!"

Myonri looked down at her handheld device while covering the small screen with her hand to keep the light from escaping.

"Dorothy is at the front of the ship."

"Let's do what we can. There's no way we can seajack this thing in ten minutes."

After Quenser and Heivia formed a pair and Myonri and Sewax formed a pair, the two pairs travelled through the piles of containers on deck while covering for each other.

As an unpleasant sweat dripped down his face, Heivia muttered to himself.

"Don't use your gun. Rely on your knife. Don't use your gun. After a single gunshot, you'll have to jump into the ocean."

Fortunately, the large number of containers (which were likely there as decoys to hide the human trafficking) provided a lot of cover. The four of them carefully travelled toward the bow of the ship while making sure they did not run into any guards.

And suddenly, they heard the roaring of the wind.

Except this was no normal wind.

"(Get down, you idiot! Don't move!!)"

Heivia whispered quietly, grabbed the back of Quenser's collar, and got down on the deck. Ahead of them, Myonri and Sewax pressed their backs against metal containers and held their breath. Their faces were obviously covered with an unusual amount of sweat.

Quenser belatedly realized what was going on.

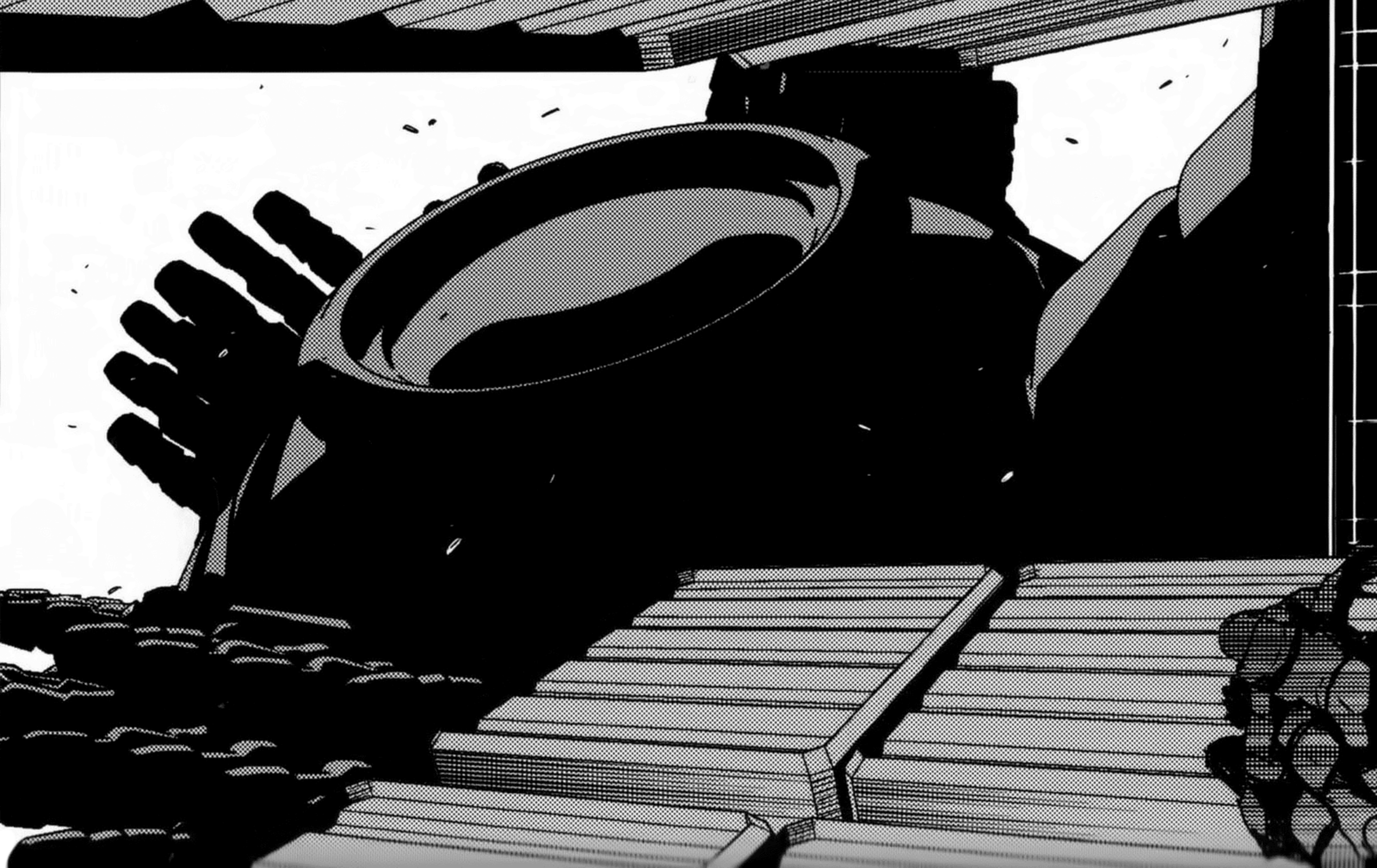
What he had thought was the wind was actually a disturbance in the air caused by the movement of a great mass. It was similar to when a train rushed by a subway platform.

A sealed tunnel was one thing, but not much could do the same on the open sea.

This was the symbol of war.

It was the trademark of the era that could destroy every other weapon on the battlefield.

In other words…



"An Object!!" he groaned while lying on the deck.

Even the mid-sized cargo ship towered above the ocean surface like a cliff, but the Object was on an entirely different level. Its spherical main body was around fifty meters tall and equipped with over one hundred different cannons. Despite the cargo ships' immense size, it looked like a plastic miniature next to the Object.

Its presence was overwhelming.

Its sense of intimidation was overwhelming.

The sense of danger it radiated was overwhelming.

Everything about it was overwhelming.

"They're from the Information Alliance," said Heivia as he almost lay on top of Quenser and looked like he was about to cry. "These are second generation Objects from the Information Alliance. I think that's the Simple Is Best and the Catapult Cargo. This is no joke. There's no way we can take on an enemy like this."

Heivia listed two names.

The meaning of that fact arrived along with despair as Quenser forced his neck around to observe the situation.

The cargo ship was passing between two Objects that were patrolling the dark sea. As he looked up at the towering armor and countless cannons, it somehow reminded him of a thick green tunnel made of trees.

If any one of those cannons was fired, Quenser and the others would be blasted into pieces too small to even make fish food.

But at the same time…

"We were right," he muttered. "Even if second generation Objects are specialized toward fighting other Objects, they would have detected us if they were making full use of their sensors. But they aren't attacking and they haven't contacted Blue Bottle to send out his men."

"That means this ship is not being checked. If they scanned it, they might detect all the people stuffed in the containers. The data would remain in the Object's recorder and it would be a pain to alter it."

But that did not mean they could move around freely.

Objects were the rulers of the battlefield. They were a non-standard monster with no natural enemies that could freely devour all other life forms before them. It was as if they had been born due to some kind of bug or mistake.

No one was stupid enough to stick their own arm in the beast's mouth to see whether it had been tamed or not.

No one wanted to be the pitiable guinea pig.

Quenser and the others held their breath and watched the two Objects slowly move away from the cargo ship. Even then, they did not move. An uncomfortable sweat grew below their uniforms.

It came down to their intuition rather than logic.

Once the Objects were several hundred meters away, Quenser finally let out a long breath.

That was still plenty close for the second generation Objects to attack, but he still felt the relief of being in the clear.

Heivia used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his face as he got up off of Quenser.

"Try to remember what it is we're fighting, lady killer."

"Now that we're here, we have to go through with this regardless."

The four of them began moving at the same time.

Myonri jogged ahead from one pile of containers to another. She then pointed at the first level of containers with her thumb.

"Dorothy is in here. What should we do?"

"We might as well use this chance to rescue as many of them as we can. Quenser, set up your trick as planned!"

The four of them all moved in different directions.

Heivia and Myonri grabbed the metal lever.

But then Myonri frowned.

"Wait a second. I just noticed something."

"What is it? I don't see any tripwires."

"It isn't that."

Myonri let go of the lever to open the door and traced her finger across the string of letters printed on the metal door.

"This is a refrigerated container. This thing is basically a gigantic freezer."

"Why the hell would they throw an 80-year-old woman in there !?"

They forcibly pulled the lever and opened the door.

As soon as the metal door opened, chilly air seemed to cut at their cheeks. Just as Myonri had said, the inside of the wall was covered in white frost.

And…

A small figure was lying on its side in the fetal position.

And it was just the one person.

"What the hell…? What the hell!? I thought Blue Bottle's group was working in human trafficking? Why are they freezing them from the get-go!?"

"Wait! Don't carelessly pick her up! Her exposed skin might be frozen to the container floor!"

Fortunately, Myonri's fears were unfounded. The old woman's hair seemed frozen, but her skin did not stick to the floor.

Heivia picked up Dorothy and carried her out of the container.

"They might have been trying to simulate hibernation," said Sewax as he read the writing on the container.

"What?"

"There are cases of people surviving without food or water for over a month in cars buried in snow. Only one in nine survive, but their 'merchandise' can survive the long trip if the conditions are artificially recreated. It has better odds than leaving it up to luck after throwing them in a hot and stuffy container with water and salt."

"I see. So that's why they put them in separate containers." Myonri let out a groan as she thought about this demonic plan. "It's the same as anesthesia. The temperature is carefully calculated out based on the person's weight, so they all need their own container."

"So what? This isn't going to work 100% of the time. For one thing, humans aren't meant to hibernate like a bear! If they force it, it has to fail and cause frostbite or hypothermia in a lot of them!!"

"True, but there's a countermeasure that's popular among people stranded in snowy mountains. If you warm the outside of the body with lukewarm water and eat food, it will cause an increase in body temperature."

"I guess a normal water bottle would be warm enough on a warm night like this. I only have disgusting rations for food, though."

"If they're conscious enough to complain about that, there's nothing to worry about."

Heivia and Sewax's discussion must have brought her back to her senses because Dorothy slowly opened her eyes while her skin was oddly cold.

She looked like someone who had just woken up in the morning, but the situation was completely different.

For one thing, she had not been sleeping. Her mind was muddled enough for her memories to be a bit vague.

"That…soldier…?"

"Yes! That's right! We're here to save you. There's nothing more to worry about."

"Are you…the one named…Quenser?"

"Sorry, but there are even better guys than him in the world."

They could not force her to do anything more.

Heivia frantically pulled out a ration that resembled a tasteless and odorless eraser and a bottle warmed by the warm night and his own body temperature.

And then he heard a noise.

Someone was peering out from behind a pile of containers. Heivia did not know who it was, but he made up his mind when he saw the shoddily-made assault rifle in his hand. He was a criminal organization guard on patrol.

He was only seven meters away.

The assault rifle hung from his shoulder on a sling belt, but he was not holding the rifle. He held a different weapon.

But it was not a handgun or a knife.

It was a glittering black sphere about one size bigger than a golf ball.

All of Heivia's hair stood on end when he realized what it was.

"A grenade!?"

In that instant, Sewax held up his heavy camera as if pulling a handgun from its holster and he stared through the viewfinder.

(Oh, I'm dead.)

Time seemed to flow strangely slow, but he did not try to hide or cover his face with his arms. He stood stock still and continued to keep the armed man in the center of the small world cut off by his camera.

He held a Gr-021, the grenades used by the old Oceanian military government. They were rumored to be cheap copies of the Information Alliance's grenades. They had a kill radius of five meters and an injury radius of twelve meters. The soldier may not have known how to use it properly because he was liable to be caught in the blast that killed using shrapnel rather than the explosion itself.

If the guard holding the sphere relaxed his grip, pulled out the pin, and released the safety lever, over two hundred metal grains would fly in every direction with deadly speed exactly five seconds later. Man, woman, adult, and child alike would be turned to mincemeat.

Even so, Sewax operated his camera as if it were his mission.

He wanted to take a photo that would change the world.

War would never end no matter how many hundreds of bullets were fired. The people whose bank accounts grew every time the money-devouring Objects were sent out would continue applauding in dark rooms as more blood was shed. To truly end it all, the people's hearts had to be moved outside of what the people in charge had to gain. That was something bullets could not

achieve. No matter how great a tragedy was, it would resound in no one's heart unless a battlefield cameraman recorded it.

He had wanted an opportunity to do just that.

It did not matter if it would take the lives of a few people here. It did not matter if that danger applied to him as well. He would not regret the loss of an arm or a leg. He was willing to lose half his body if that was what it took. If he could bring home the picture that would change history and bring peace, he would proudly say he had won.

As the person who had once relied on bullets in this very country, he felt this was something he had to do no matter what.

But…

Even so…

(Is that really okay?)

Through the viewfinder, he saw Heivia crouched down while frozen in place. At his feet was a small old woman who lay groggily on the ground after being rescued from an extreme low-temperature environment.

If they died, it would likely shake some people's hearts.

If he stored that shocking bloodshed in the small memory of his camera, he could use it to convey the truth of the battlefield.

(But is that really okay!?)

There was no point in saving just a few lives. It would mix in with all the other boring news and reach no one, so it might as well not exist. Information that reached no one was no different from information that vanished from the face of the earth. At that very moment, the people within safe countries thought the world was a peaceful place. They truly believed it. And yet the war in Oceania had yet to truly end. To ultimately end war, those people's help was needed.

And so…

To stop the tragedies, Sewax hoped for a tragedy to occur. That contradictory mindset led him to hesitate over whether to accept or reject this situation.

And…

He finally made his decision.

A metallic sound of impact brought Heivia back to his senses.

The battlefield cameraman named Sewax had removed the neck strap attachment to the camera he valued more than his life and he threw it at the guard holding the grenade.

"I'm not going back to the way I was. I swore I would stop doing that!! I swore during that war in Oceania!!"

As Sewax shouted out in desperation, Heivia began to move. The camera was heavy, but it was not enough to knock out that large man by striking his upper body. However, the man decided to prioritize his own safety by protecting his body with his arms. And he still held the grenade in his hand. He had not released the pin or safety lever.

They had a chance.

Heivia immediately let go of the ration and water bottle and drew his large military knife with a flowing motion of his right hand. He even had enough composure to cover Dorothy's eyes with his left hand.

He threw the knife without hesitation.

After rotating exactly ninety degrees, the tip of the blade stabbed accurately into the guard's throat.

(Damn.)

But Heivia's expression twisted silently.

The man did not collapse. It was a fatal blow but not enough to kill him instantly.

There was going to be a lag of a few seconds to a dozen seconds .

(I missed the center. The blade didn't hit his spine!!)

As Heivia watched, the man's fingers writhed like caterpillars and reached for the grenade's metal pin. One finger passed through the ring of the pin.

All he had to do was release it now.

Pulled by gravity, the explosive fell straight down. The pin attached to his index finger was pulled out. The shock of the round grenade striking the deck was enough to release the safety lever.

It was ready to detonate.

"!!"

Heivia saw Myonri immediately pull out her handgun, so he took action. While still crouched down, he ran forward like a beast. The man with the blade in his throat could not speak, but he glared at Heivia. The ring-shaped pin on his index finger glittered in the light like a cruel piece of jewelry.

The kill radius was five meters.

The injury radius was twelve meters.

It would explode in only five seconds.

(Just killing him isn't enough. We'll all be caught in the blast!!)

As the guard started to fall backwards, Heivia grabbed his collar. This was not a gentlemanly attempt to support the man. He grabbed the man's right arm, spun him around, and used the man's waist as a fulcrum to throw him to the ground.

He threw the man on top of the grenade he had dropped.

A muffled explosion arrived an instant later.

The cheap bulletproof plate and the living flesh and bone were enough to suppress the explosion of a grenade meant to kill with shrapnel rather than the blast. In textbooks, this method was given as a means of bravely protecting one's fellow soldiers.

Heivia was splattered with blood and guts and he desperately shouted out with a ghastly look on his face.

"Ugh, shit!! Is anyone hurt!? If not, jump into the ocean. That explosion will draw the rest of them here!!"

"Wh-what about Quenser!?"

"He'll have heard the explosion too!!"

Myonri grabbed Dorothy who could not move properly on her own and the girl frantically jumped over the railing. Sewax picked up his camera and followed suit. Heivia grabbed a few polyurethane foam floats from the railing and threw them in the sea before jumping into the dark water himself.

The shock of falling or having her entire body covered in lukewarm seawater seemed to have helped Dorothy recover a little from her hypothermic symptoms.

She repeatedly blinked while Myonri supported her so she would not sink.

"Where is everyone…?"

As her mind cleared, her memories seemed to recover.

Her question was filled with panic.

"Where are all the others!? They were brought onboard that ship!! There are a lot more than just me!!"

It was a legitimate question, but Heivia and the others did not answer her.

The cargo ship would be on its guard now, so it would be difficult to make their way back onboard. It would be tough to fight a few dozen armed men with only four people. On top of that , there was no guarantee they would make it back safely as things were.

And then a new figure fell from the cargo ship and into the dark water.

It was Quenser who had gone elsewhere on the boat.

"Uuh… I'm gonna sink. Give me a float, too."

"Since you escaped with that stupid look on your face, I take it you at least completed your preparations."

"Who do you think you're talking to here? More importantly, what was with that explosion!? You sure screwed up badly!"

With a look of extreme confusion, Dorothy looked back and forth between Quenser and Heivia.

Quenser spoke to the old woman.

"Defeating Blue Bottle's entire organization with just the four of us would be difficult. The same goes for rescuing all of the people trapped in separate containers. And that cargo ship is under the protection of the Information Alliance, so we're unlikely to get any help even if we ask for it."

"Then you are going to give up? I don't want to be the only one rescued!!" shouted Dorothy.

Quenser smiled and waved his index finger.

"But there is a wonderful magic item that can completely turn around that hopeless situation."

"?"

That comment caught Dorothy off guard, so she stared blankly at Quenser as he spread out the "prize" he had won on the boat.

"This is it. Do you know what this is?"

Part 16

(This is a strange ship.)

The man referred to as Blue Bottle, the name of a poisonous jellyfish, thought blankly to himself as he sat in a chair in the cargo ship's control room.

Ships used fuel to move. Fuel efficiency was greatly affected by the weight loaded on the ship. Normally, cargo ships were almost entirely automated and had only around a dozen people in their crew. The people themselves weighed something and they needed food and water to last them anywhere from a few weeks to a few months, so the number of people onboard was kept to a minimum.

Nevertheless, this ship had a large number of people onboard.

Officially, they were exporting scrap metal from Oceania's ruins so it could be recycled in other countries, but a quick calculation would show some things did not add up.

"That was an explosion," said Blue Bottle.

"We will look into it right away," immediately replied a man staring at the instruments.

Blue Bottle doubted the refrigerated containers with the human trafficking "merchandise" inside could be opened from within and he doubted the merchandise inside could resist or escape after being kept at such a low temperature.

But his men were not proper soldiers or even trained mercenaries.

They were nothing but thugs. It was possible one of them had forgotten to lock a container or turn on its refrigeration mode.

Nevertheless, he seriously doubted they were stupid enough to let an unarmed civilian steal a gun or grenade and fight back.

Blue Bottle's expression showed no panic or concern.

"Tell them to be careful if they kill an escapee. Just like preserved fish, their value goes down if they die. And the amount it drops changes depending on how they are killed. Blowing them to pieces with a grenade is out of the question."

"I will tell them, but I can't guarantee they will listen."

Blue Bottle did not bother listening to what the other man said.

The cargo ship was not headed directly toward the country the "merchandise" was being shipped to. It would instead travel to a certain island just outside Oceanian territory and load the containers onto a different ship. Blue Bottle would remain with this cargo ship in its short journey back and forth. To make the best use the free pass given by the Information Alliance, he had wanted a setup that travelled through that area of sea as frequently as possible.

Suddenly, the same man as before continued speaking despite the conversation having ended.

"This is from the Information Alliance Object. They want to speak with you."

"Hand it over."

The man sitting in front of the console removed his headset and tossed it over. Blue Bottle caught it in one hand and brought the microphone to his mouth without putting it on his head.

"What is it? We paid the fee. If you cause any unnecessary problems here, the Objects from other world powers will notice. The Information Alliance doesn't want to damage its public image, does it? You can't have our arrangement come to light."

"That's why I contacted you," replied a staticky and slightly irritated voice. "Why are you not following our arrangement? Our free pass means nothing otherwise. We are forced to handle this normally."

"Wait. I don't understand. Explain what you mean."

"The flag." The polite Elite spoke slowly as if kindly speaking to a young child who was only just learning to speak. "Our Information Alliance flag should be on the bow of your cargo ship. Without that, we cannot prove you are under our protection. If you do not obey our arrangement, we must perform a surprise check like we normally would."

As Quenser entrusted his life to a hard float in the dark ocean, he threw away a piece of cloth printed with the Information Alliance logo and spoke.

"Their ship was treated differently because they were announcing that they were under the Information Alliance's protection by displaying their flag. They have a free pass with the Information Alliance and it would cause conflict if the Legitimacy Kingdom or Capitalist Corporations performed a surprise check on a ship approved by them. They had intentionally set up that situation so they could carry out things they wanted kept secret."

"Th-then…" Dorothy looked toward the flag floating away on the waves. "If you take that flag…"

"At the very least, they won't be treated differently anymore. The Information Alliance will have to perform the same check as with a normal ship. If they let them go, the Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith Organization would try to perform a check instead."

"B-but!" frantically exclaimed Dorothy because there were human lives on the line. "Will that really save everyone? I thought the Information Alliance was friends with that ship. Won't they perform an intentionally insufficient check and give their approval without looking inside the containers?"

"Perhaps. In fact, that would be the best option from their point of view. They need to perform a check before the other world powers can. They can give their approval and announce that no one else needs to check the ship. Then no one will find out there are people in those containers."

"Th-then…!!"

"But," said Quenser, cutting off Dorothy. He held a radio in his hand. "That's why I set up another trick."

The Information Alliance's naval patrol boat rushed over.

The others in the cargo ship's control room muttered nervously, but Blue Bottle was not worried.

It was not that he had given up.

It was quite the opposite.

An Information Alliance group he held sway with had taken action before security teams from the other world powers could intervene. Once the Information Alliance group boarded the ship, they would perform an intentionally shoddy inspection and give them approval. Rechecking the ship would be seen as doubt in the Information Alliance, so doing so was implicitly stated to create cracks in the friendly relationship between coalition members.

Why had their flag vanished?

That mystery remained. One of his men may have forgotten his instructions, it may have been poorly attached and blew away in the wind, or someone may have maliciously removed it.

But no matter the reason, they could recover.

An oddity of that level would not defeat Blue Bottle.

"The Information Alliance security team is requesting permission to board. What should we do?"

"Hide nothing. Give them permission according to normal procedures. Do not leave any unnatural actions in their records. There is no reason to panic here. This group is in on it."

Having said that, Blue Bottle took several men and left the control room. He was on his way to greet the Information Alliance security team. And that was not a criminal euphemism for shooting them. He was truly going to greet them.

He stepped out onto the deck and found several thick metal devices attached to the railing. Synthetic fiber ropes were attached and men dressed all in black were climbing up from below.

One of the men gave a polite salute to Blue Bottle while carefully articulating each word and syllable of his script.

"This is a surprise inspection in order to stop international crime within Oceania. We will be inspecting your crew and cargo."

"Fine. Do as you wish."

Upon receiving permission, the men in black formed teams of two and scattered across the ship.

All of this was pre-arranged.

It was possible the other world powers forming the coalition were watching with a satellite or an Object's ultra long distance

sensors, so they had to perform a bit of role playing for safety's sake. Nothing would go wrong and anything illegal would not be recorded. That was the agreement.

Blue Bottle spoke to one man in black standing nearby.

"How long should this take?"

"There are a lot of containers, so we would like an hour to check through them all."

"…That's a long time."

"We are not doing this because we want to."

That last comment sounded like an implicit accusation regarding the missing flag.

Even if it was meant to keep them safe, it was hard to put up with this when it would accomplish nothing. Every minute and every second seemed to stretch on forever. He had to maintain his expression and attitude in case they were being viewed from afar, but he felt as if he would yawn if he let his guard down.

But then he heard what sounded like a light explosion.

It came from the ship and it was clearly the sound of gunpowder exploding.

"I won't let it all go so smoothly," said Quenser while pressing the switch on his radio. "The leaders of this Information Alliance group and criminal organization have an agreement to get along, but not all the criminal thugs will be privy to all that information. After all, secret arrangements are made behind closed doors. The more the big boss handles those things on his own, the less the men working below him know."

"Heh. So even if this is actually all a farce, you're saying not everyone in the criminal organization will be aware of it? All they know is the Information Alliance security team has boarded them after some kind of mistake and the cargo ship is full of their half-dead human trafficking 'merchandise'. They can't let that get out, so they'll be staring at the Information Alliance's guns with their heart pounding."

The same naturally went for the Information Alliance security team.

The leader would know about the understanding with the criminal organization and the soldiers underneath him may have received an explanation. But could they really trust those criminals ? They might have been lying. Who knows when those uncontrolled criminals would fire. They would be filled with those fears.

"So." Quenser slowly shook the radio. "With a small impetus, the guns they have pointed at each other will start to go off. For example, a radio signal could lead an electric fuse to cause an explosive noise and they could mistake it for the 'first shot'."

Fuses were tools used to induce the detonation of an explosive by providing a strong stimulus.

They were made to create a more intense explosion than a firecracker.

And the ocean night was filled with countless bursting noises.

A few of them were the electric fuses Quenser had prepared ahead of time, but some of the noises were clearly different. If one paid careful attention, they were obviously different noises, but these people were not calm enough for that.

"Stop them!!"

Blue Bottle covered his ears with his hands and approached a pile of metal containers while yelling at the nearby Information Alliance man. If he had not yelled, his voice would have been drowned out by the explosive noises.

"Which side shot!? It doesn't matter! Stop them!! This is a meaningless battle. Didn't your higher ups explain this to-…!?"

Blue Bottle trailed off.

With a damp noise, the man in black he had been speaking to collapsed to the side. His head slammed into the container and red blood splattered across the wall as if a fruit had been crushed there . Simply slamming his head against the wall would not cause that

much blood. A bullet had obviously disturbed the contents of his head. The cargo ship was enveloped in such chaos that it was impossible to tell which side of the conflict the bullet had come from.

"Shit!!"

Blue Bottle felt a chill run down his spine and pulled his handgun from its holster.

And then his gaze met that of an Information Alliance soldier.

A short pause followed.

As soon as his thoughts recovered, Blue Bottle realized he had committed a fatal mistake.

"N-no!! I wasn't trying to fight!!"

His words did not reach the soldier.

As soon as the soldier's gun barrel moved to target him, Blue Bottle reflexively fired three bullets into the foolish soldier's upper body.

Naturally, everyone aboard the chaotic ship witnessed it.

There was no going back now.

A hopeless battle with one of the world powers had begun.

Part 17

Froleytia Capistrano held her head in her hands.

A female operator's reserved voice filled the operation control room.

"The battle has ended aboard cargo ship Mistral near St. Frank International Harbor. Level of damage to the Information Alliance team is unknown. It appears they have successfully retreated. The bodies of the crew are still being counted. They have likely all been killed."

A sudden firefight had been detected aboard a cargo ship near Oceania. A Legitimacy Kingdom naval security team had intervened in the name of aiding the Information Alliance team being attacked.

The problem was the fact that Quenser and Heivia of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion were floating in the ocean near the cargo ship. They looked pleased with themselves and carried an old woman with them.

"Thirty nine civilians have been discovered within the refrigerated containers. This matches the information from Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell."

"I see."

"Also, a man closely resembling an important criminal known as Blue Bottle has been discovered among the corpses. His identity is currently being checked, but if it really is him, they are likely

correct about the Mistral being owned by a criminal organization active across Oceania."

"One filthy man isn't enough to make up for this," muttered Froleytia under her breath.

She changed her train of thought and focused on her transmission with a distant superior Legitimacy Kingdom officer. Even if Froleytia controlled an entire battalion, she still had to refer to this person as a superior officer.

"The human trafficking organization has been eliminated, but the Information Alliance has evidence that men from my unit intervened. They will begin applying diplomatic pressure before long. This might also start another military conflict."

"Oh, I'd say it's 100% guaranteed to do that," replied the young man in a lighthearted tone. "But this would have ended the same even if your men had not acted."

"?"

"What if they had learned of the human trafficking organization , but returned without doing anything? Or what if you had done nothing in response to the wrong number from the kidnapper? Once harm had come to Oceanian civilians, the Information Alliance would have anonymously blamed the Legitimacy Kingdom. They would have called us despicable cowards who sacrificed civilians to protect ourselves from the mafias and gangs. They would have said someone like that has no place on the coalition that is provisionally ruling the peace of Oceania. From

the moment this began, we had no choice but to accept the fight they were picking with us."

"Then that wrong number…"

"It seems odd, doesn't it? Most likely, the Information Alliance intentionally gave the criminal organization the wrong number for the girl's home. I also read in your report that the girl was strapped with a bomb when she was rescued from the abandoned hospital. A bomb that would be activated with a phone."

"I get it now. If they simply planned to get as much money from her family as they could and never intended to release her, they would not have needed such a dangerous setup."

"They wanted to create an obvious civilian victim right away. If you had failed there, they would have their justification to say we were exposing the people of Oceania to danger and needed to be eliminated for Oceania's sake."

It made sense.

It was obvious what they gained from it.

The housewives in safe country living rooms watching variety shows with popcorn in one hand would accept that reason for war.

But…

"In that case, the Information Alliance dug their own grave," said Froleytia. "They created a pipeline with human traffickers of all things."

"I doubt they were careless enough to leave any conclusive evidence behind. They are the world power that puts the most emphasis on information, after all. No matter what anyone claims, they can insist it was nothing but a desperate bluff on the criminal organization's part."

The superior officer's tone remained lighthearted.

Yet his words cut accurately into the history of mankind.

"But if we are going to go to war regardless, it is easier for us on the political side if the reason has less of a bad aftertaste. You did well. And we will accept the fight they were so insistent that we begin."

"Understood."

The transmission came to an end.

Froleytia let out a long sigh before finally speaking quietly.

"Then let's begin talking about war."

Part 18

Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, Sewax, and the old woman named Dorothy were brought back to land by the Legitimacy Kingdom naval security team's patrol boat. A military vehicle from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion picked them up there and took them to the maintenance base zone. On the way, they were repeatedly

asked what had happened from people with curious looks. Each time they repeated their tale of heroism, they were struck lightly by a fist. However, the soldiers that complained and struck Quenser and Heivia all had smiles in their eyes.

"Where are we going?" asked Dorothy as she stared at the cityscape outside the window.

"You will be brought home…or to your hotel since you're a tourist. Anyway, it seems your daughter and her husband have been invited to the base, so you can have your emotional reunion there," replied Quenser casually.

The military four-wheel drive vehicle returned to the familiar maintenance base zone. When the soldiers on guard duty at the gate heard what had happened, they stared at Quenser and the others like they were some kind of rare animal.

"Hey, Quenser. Doesn't it look like the rumor has already spread throughout the base?"

"I wish I could view that in as positive a light as you. We might be on our way to the detention barracks."

The maintenance base was made up of over one hundred large vehicles. They thought they were being led to the section used for lodgings, but the military vehicle stopped partway there.

They had likely been spotted through the window because a man and woman who looked like tourists run out of the lodgings.

Dorothy's eyes opened wide and she moved her trembling lips.

She looked like she was seeing people she had never expected to see again.

"That is my daughter and her husband… My grandchild is there too."

Quenser opened the vehicle's door.

Dorothy used all her strength to run through the maintenance base which was lit up by so many lights it did not seem like nighttime.

"…"

In that moment, the battlefield cameraman named Sewax naturally peered through his camera's viewfinder.

A photo of a family tearfully embracing may not have been sensational or shocking enough to be titled "the truth of the battlefield".

It was not going to win any world-famous awards and it was not enough to make one's name as a photographer.

But that photograph surely had something powerful enough to move the world.

Chapter 2: My Job is to Transport Paint >> Intelligence Battle in Oceania

Part 1

"The situation is quite simple," began Major Froleytia Capistrano in the pre-mission briefing room which was filled with soldiers. "The Information Alliance is turning false accusation against us and the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion intends to respond in full force. Beginning now, the entire battalion will prepare our response. They will be sending a second generation Object, so if you don't want to die, help the princess score as many points as possible."

Froleytia stood on a large platform and the white wall behind her was being used a projector screen.

Their greatest threat at the moment was displayed there.

"Our only confirmed enemy at the moment is the Information Alliance's second generation Object named Simple Is Best. Its main cannon is a low-stability plasma cannon and its propulsion method is an air cushion for both naval and land use, but its most unique features are the pointed beak-shaped armor added to the front and the countless high-output ion thrusters attached for auxiliary propulsion."

Several documents were displayed at once.

The intelligence division's research and analysis of the Object had made enough progress for that much information.

Heivia leaned over and whispered to Quenser.

"(What were those high-output something or others?)"

"(A type of ion engine. Normally, ion engines are attached to space probes to provide weak but lengthy effects in zero-gravity, but this thing uses the energy of an Object's reactor to forcibly produce an insane output. You can think of it like a space shuttle sitting on its side.)"

"(Why would they use such a pain-in-the-ass method?)"

"(There are several rumors about that. Some say the Information Alliance is trying to build a flying Object. Others say they're trying to develop a perfect circulation system to search for habitable planets outside the solar system. Either way, the Simple Is Best is a project being used as a starting point.)"

"(What? I thought it was the Faith Organization that was desperate to make a flying Object. Wasn't it called the Sky Castle Project or something? Instead of going with the more scientific-sounding 'outer space', they wanted a more religious-sounding 'kingdom above the clouds'.)"

"(It's nothing but a reckless project for the moment, but if another world power completes that great desire of theirs ahead of time, it would break the hearts of the Faith Organization's people.)"

"(I see. Attacking at their weak spot like that does sound like the Information Alliance.)"

"(But I hope it all ends up as a pipe dream. A flying Object would be hard to shoot down and shooting it down might cause an impact on the level of an asteroid and cause an ice age.)"

Looking over the diagram told them the Simple Is Best had a V-shaped board-like part at the bottom and a long straight part extending from the back. Overall, it had an arrow-like shape. The spherical main body was essentially attached atop the three lines making up the arrow.

The V-shaped part was used to regulate the horizontal direction and the straight line on the back was used to provide space for the aforementioned high-output ion thrusters. Atop that long board like float, several cylindrical thrusters were attached at an angle. Each and every one of them was over twenty meters long.

"As the name suggests, the Object's strategy is very simple. It does not try to evade at all. It ignores any damage, approaches its target along the shortest and fastest route, and fires its main cannon at almost point-blank range. Despite being an Object, its top speed reaches the sound barrier. Once targeted by it, your average Object cannot escape."

"The sound barrier," muttered Quenser who had become just one of the crowd. "But that thing's a 200 thousand ton hunk of metal. Can it really maintain control while moving along the surface at the speed of sound?"

"Keep your comments to yourself, war criminal."

"I can see that nickname sticking, so please stop calling me that! !" cried Quenser with tears in his eyes.

Froleytia ignored him and continued speaking.

"The beak-like armor on the front is a collection of extremely thin metal leaf. You could call it a crystallization of the best aspects of reactive armor technology. Whenever it detects an effective attack such as from a low-stability plasma cannon or railgun, the thin armor is detached to reduce the damage. If you keep at it and continue fire, it will eventually run out like a roll of toilet paper, but that is where its speed comes into play. While you are taking your time doing that, it will reach point-blank range. In other words, it will not take evasive actions. It will trust in the strength of its shield and charge in from the front, no matter what kind of main cannon it is up against."

Its specs could make one think otherwise, but the enemy's greatest feature was its armor rather than its speed. Even the Legitimacy Kingdom was already developing Objects that focused on speed and tried to approach within close range of the target. However, it was something else entirely to not take any evasive actions and stick to the shortest course no matter what.

This direct weapon would charge in on a straight line and endure any attack to the front.

And based on the difference in speed, the Baby Magnum could not escape.

Being targeted by that Object would essentially mean the end of the match.

"The aforementioned toilet paper is only equipped to the front of the Object. Attacks from the side, back, or above will get through just fine. …But the Simple Is Best will of course be aware of its own weakness. If the Baby Magnum tries to circle around, it will likely anticipate the action and adjust its position to compensate. The situation would be different if we had more than one Object as well, but we only have one at present. It will be extremely difficult to get behind the Simple Is Best due to its superior speed."

Heivia had been casually listening, but then he frowned.

"Wait a sec."

"What is it, war criminal #2?"

"At least make me #1! Being ranked under him is the biggest insult!!" he shouted before getting to his question. "Did you just say if we had more than one Object 'as well'?"

"Oh, that." Froleytia brushed up her bangs in annoyance. " According to some information the intelligence division got their

hands on, the Information Alliance is trying to use the false accusations against us to contact the other world powers. They are suggesting they work together to defeat a common enemy. I do not know who will go along with it, but we might have to deal with more than one Object if someone wants to use this as an opportunity to damage the Legitimacy Kingdom."

Quenser and Heivia grimaced.

The current age was known as one of clean wars fought by Objects. Objects influenced everything in those wars. The funds and technology poured into the opposing Objects was important, but the number of Objects was even more important. If it came down to one-against-three, the result was immediately obvious, so it was best to retreat as soon as possible.

"But any newcomers will simply be trying to take advantage of the situation. The Simple Is Best is the main pillar of the enemy force, so destroying it could easily convince the remaining Object or Objects not to stick around and bring even more damage to themselves."

In that case, their primary target was the Simple Is Best.

To escape a disadvantageous battle against multiple Objects, their only option was to swiftly destroy that central pillar.

Part 2

In the true desert away from the city and devoid of the asphalt and concrete that gathered heat, the nights grew cold quickly.

Quenser's military uniform was made to handle the cold, but his teeth were chattering as he watched a 1seg broadcast on his military handheld device. The backlight dimly lit up his face as if he was holding a flashlight below his head.

"Oh ho ho. Welcome to the New York Miracle Net Festa! All of you around the world in front of your monitors, be charmed by this enchanting song and dance!! Yay!!"

"Yay!" shouted Quenser. "Bouncing breasts and a shaking ass!! "

"Quenser, you idiot! What are you watching in the middle of our night mission!?"

"It's called escapism! I came to the battlefield to learn about Object design, so why am I freezing to death out in the desert!?"

"Just turn it off, you idiot! Do you want to die!? …No, wait. Let me see it before you turn it off!! Come to think of it, why do you have an invitation code to that net concert!?"

"I don't know why, but I get emails from her a lot. She can monitor whether the code was used or not and she said she'd shoot me on the battlefield if I didn't watch it."

Suddenly, Quenser's radio emitted a quick electronic tone.

The princess's voice soon followed.

"Quenser, explain further."

"Wow! I don't know what's going on, but the princess is pissed! Since she hasn't realized her request to explain further contradicts that, she must be the type who doesn't realize how angry she is. But why!?"

Quenser frantically asked Heivia for help, but his friend gave the wonderfully gentlemanly response of raising his middle finger and shouting "How should I know!! Maybe it's divine punishment !!"

"All military transmissions are checked in the server, you know ? What do you think you are doing there?" asked the princess.

"Wow!! Are you mad because I'm watching an Information Alliance idol's ass on a mission against the Information Alliance? I didn't realize you were such a stickler for the rules."

"……
……
……"

Comments of "this is very bad" started coming from the other soldiers spread out across the desert whose names Quenser did not know.

"If you're gonna go with divine punishment, keep it to him!! If you use your main cannon, you'll blow me away too!!" shouted Heivia without even trying to hide his self-centered fears.

"Honestly, why are boys so easily manipulated by girls who sing? Anyone can sing."

"I can't let that comment go, princess. I hope I can expect great things of your singing ability. If you aren't aware, a certain island nation has this thing called karaoke!!"

"(Twitch) …Y-you're on."

"You can kill me!! As long as he dies, I don't care if you fire the Object's cannons!!"

Quenser ignored Heivia's shouting and pulled the night vision goggles down from his forehead.

His vision was digitally corrected and filled with green light.

But he continued to make desperate jokes.

"So it's finally come to this. I'm dressed in all black and wearing night vision goggles." In the moonlight and the chill that seemed to stab at him through the darkness, his breath was white. "All right! Now I'm part of the special forces! I'm the same as the Capitalist Corporations' Hollywood movie stars. You can shake my hand at an amusement park!!"

"Hey, Quenser. Could you quit being so annoying and get down? If one of their snipers blows your head off, I'm not gathering your remains. They'd be too heavy."

Heivia was dressed in an all-black uniform as well. He was lying face down on the fine sand while complaining to his rotten friend who was approaching the limit of what Heivia could put up with.

The desert was cold at night.

Some deserts were made of cracked earth and some were plains with a few weeds growing at about the thickness of a filthy middle-aged man's half-grown beard, but the ones seen in sightseeing pamphlets that were covered in nothing but sand had a large temperature difference between day and night. Because it was midsummer, the temperature did not drop below freezing, but Heivia still clicked his tongue after stabbing an electric thermometer into the sand and reading the display.

"Six degrees. It's six degrees Celsius. You could throw some fish out here without needing to refrigerate it. What the hell is going on ?"

"I think the distance is a bigger problem," said Quenser as he lay down on the sand. "We're ten kilometers away. Why did we have to get off the truck so far away? This isn't a carefully maintained sports field. Walking there and back is going to shorten my life."

"Shut up. Don't act like you could even run a city quarter marathon with plenty of water stations," spat out Heivia. "At ground level, you can only see about five kilometers away. The earth is round, so the horizon covers up everything beyond that. But this is the empty desert. If the tires disturbed the sand and created a dust cloud as we travelled, it could poke up above the horizon."

"I know what you're trying to say, but shouldn't the dedicated scouts handle these long-range reconnaissance missions? This

doesn't make sense. Everyone may have forgotten, but I'm only a student who wanted to learn about Object design on the battlefield ."

"And I'm a radar analyst! That's an indoor job!! I'm supposed to have a cool intellectual position in an air conditioned room and a bottle of mineral water in hand, so how did I end up on this hellish picnic where I'm freezing my ass off in the desert!?"

Their commanding officer then contacted them over their radio.

Froleytia seemed to be as annoyed as them.

"Quiet down, war criminals. Do you really think you are in any position to choose your job? You should be thankful we actually need you."

"Wow. I've been wondering. Shouldn't we add a monitor to our radios? Then we could be supplied with someone – anyone – in a micro bikini."

"You don't get it, Heivia. This is the world of imagination. If everything is out in the open, it isn't as arousing."

"Okay, war criminals. Keep in mind that I can dock your pay for disrespect at any time."

Quenser and Heivia solemnly prostrated themselves in front of the radio.

However, their apology was cheaper than a movie theater hot dog.

"(Quenser, this is because of your creepy comment about the world of imagination!)"

"(Are you sure it isn't because of your comment about wanting ' anyone'!?)"

"Sorry, but I can hear everything the two of you are saying."

After having that pointed out, the two of them travelled through the desert night while keeping close to the ground.

The desert reflected the moonlight, so it was a bit brighter than a thick forest. However, Quenser had not undergone the basic training to receive the benefit of that. He had been relying solely on the overall greenish image produced by his night vision goggles.

"My eyes hurt. You aren't supposed to have light shining on your eyes from so close. Are you sure this isn't going to ruin my eyesight? Is the blue light really okay?"

"You're complaining about that on a battlefield where you could be blown to pieces in one second? More importantly, we need to keep following the remains of the pipeline. We're surrounded by nothing but desert, so we'd lose our way even with a map."

Heivia pointed toward a two meter thick metal pipe a few hundred meters away. It continued in a straight line from the horizon behind them to the horizon in front of them. However, it

was brown and rusted, it had large holes in places, and it simply disappeared for a while at some points.

"Is that a remnant of the old Oceanian military government?"

"Yeah. It was a pipeline that drew water up from deep underground and carried it to large-scale farms."

"It isn't for oil?"

"It's what you call water resources. These days, the trendy thing to do is add 'resources' to something and find a way to make money off of it. As long as it makes money, it could be anything. Water resources, underground resources, power resources, food resources, human resources, sightseeing resources, living resources, forest resources, IP resources, and so on. It feels like they wouldn't worry about endangered species if they didn't have a price tag."

"Sounds like something the Capitalist Corporations would love."

"The Faith Organization would probably love this too. There are rumors of ghosts appearing at the ruins of the purification facilities and water gathering facilities the pipeline is centered around."

"Are you sure it isn't people searching for anything of value?"

"Honestly, I don't know why I even mentioned it. There's no point in a test of courage when there isn't a single girl around."

The desert was not level. It undulated like a stormy sea. When they did not choose their route carefully, they were forced to walk up and down large hills again and again. To avoid exerting unnecessary energy, they tried to choose the most level route possible.

"I feel like I'm lost on Mars."

"This is better than that. I hear there's tungsten buried below our feet."

"Tung…what?"

"Just to be clear, this isn't gonna make you any money. It's spread out too thinly for that. If this area had a valuable vein, the old military government would have dug it all up in search of funds."

After continuing a little longer, they saw some faint light beyond the desert horizon.

Heivia crouched down even lower and whispered to Quenser.

"That's gotta be it. They're really going all out."

"What is the Simple Is Best doing right now?"

"It is preparing to charge in from a position thirty kilometers from our maintenance base," cut in Froleytia. "That's much further out than that light you can see. It's hiding beyond the horizon."

There was no sign of any enemy soldiers, but the closer they approached their destination, the higher the risk of cameras and sensors. Quenser and Heivia hurried on while checking for those things using their night vision goggles' sensors.

"This is insane," said Quenser as he walked across the cold sand . "We haven't heard anything back from the intelligence division team that went in ahead of us, right? Would you normally send a student somewhere that dangerous?"

"You are not the only one involved in this," answered Froleytia.

"Still…"

"We are both professionals, so we need to be prepared for the worst case scenario. But if you run across the intelligence division team that screwed up there, take them back with you. Over."

"I am *not* a professional! I'm a student!!"

Once they arrived within three kilometers of their destination, even those two idiots stopped speaking as much.

They began to crawl slowly across the undulating sand dunes. Once they arrived at the top of one dune, their vision opened up.

"Ow…"

The night vision goggles' display filled with fluorescent green.

Feeling a slight pain in his temples, Quenser raised the goggles to his forehead and used his naked eyes.

The dark and calm desert landscape had completely changed.

The brightness had come from countless lights, both large and small.

"Yeah, it's just as we thought," groaned Heivia.

The scene several kilometers ahead of them resembled a temporary supply base. What stood out the most were the twenty large truck-like vehicles. They also saw prefab lodgings for over one hundred soldiers, gondola-equipped cranes in place of watchtowers, a communications facility, and defensive weapons ranging from tanks to mobile surface-to-air missile vehicles.

The lights ranged from large searchlights held by cranes to vehicle headlights and military flashlights. The one common factor was the complete lack of concern about hiding the light in the darkness.

While lying on the sand, Heivia pointed at one of the large truck-like vehicles.

"That's one of the Capitalist Corporations' mobile barricades. Were they called Ex. Walls? This confirms it. Another world power

has joined in to crush us along with the Information Alliance's Simple Is Best."

"That vehicle is a barricade?"

Instead of a container on the back of the truck, it had what looked like a cylinder lying on its side. Both the front and the back of the vehicle had what looked like a driver's compartment. Overall, it was reminiscent of a train.

Heivia bluntly answered Quenser's question.

"You'll see soon enough. C'mon, let's get moving."

As soon as he spoke, the driver's compartments on both sides of the vehicle began moving in opposite directions. The metal cylinder in the middle expanded like an accordion. In no time at all , it formed a giant spring-like barricade that was seven meters thick and three hundred meters long.

Quenser expressed his understanding with a displeased look.

"Oh, I get it now."

"Stupid, isn't it? By lining up two rows of ten of them, they can form three kilometer barbed wire walls on either side."

"Are they planning to stop our princess with those so the Simple Is Best can crush her?"

Barbed wire was most often viewed as a tool to prevent intruders, but it could also be laid out on the ground in coils to wrap around tank treads and armored vehicle tires.

But Quenser frowned as he lay on the sand.

"Are the Capitalist Corporations really thinking that? Forget barbed wire. You could surround the world in walls made from the same reinforced concrete as nuclear shelters and it would mean nothing against an Object's main cannon."

"Look closely and think about it. Why do you think their toys are called Ex. Walls?"

"What?"

"The Ex. stands for explosion. Change the magnification and look more closely. That coil of barbed wire is made to break into pieces if it receives a powerful shock such as from a bombardment. And each individual piece functions as an anti-personnel mine. That one truck probably has somewhere between two and three thousand."

"Why? Scattering landmines isn't going to stop the princess."

"It would still be a problem concerning the image of clean wars using Objects." One corner of Heivia's mouth twisted up in a smile . "The war treaties forbid indiscriminately laying or scattering mines. But they can weasel their way out of it in the international conference room by saying their enemy was the one that scattered

them. In other words, the princess could end up being labelled the bad guy for pulling the trigger. It would be awkward to be accused with that while stationed in Oceania to help with the war recovery. That weapon is meant to stop her with that threat."

"That's ridiculous. It's a weapon that ignores its actual ability and plays word games? It sounds like the stupid games nobles play."

"You should avoid saying that in a Legitimacy Kingdom safe country."

Froleytia then spoke up over the radio.

"Those mobile barricades form a block three kilometers across. They are being prepared simultaneously in eight places to surround our maintenance base and the Baby Magnum. Once that is complete, they will approach to tighten the circle. If we grow impatient and send out the princess, the Simple Is Best will charge in at supersonic speeds."

The missing intelligence division team had snuck into one of those eight places, but they did not know which one.

"Those barricades are mobile, so they can connect to their military network and move to match the Object's location. Once they have sealed off the princess's actions as best they can, they will create a path for the Simple Is Best to charge in. To be honest, this could be bad if they are able to work together well."

The Simple Is Best's strategy was quite broad. It used its thick front armor and the acceleration of its high-output ion thrusters to ignore the damage done to it and charge in close enough for an extreme close range main cannon blast.

The princess's only chance was at the moment of intersection.

The Simple Is Best had a monstrous top speed, but that meant it could not make tight turns. And to reduce weight, its additional armor was only on the front. If its charge was evaded by moving quickly to the left or right, it would be the princess's turn. If she fired on the Simple Is Best when its backside was showing, there was nothing it could do to avoid destruction.

Effectively sealing off the left or right evasive routes using the barricades could be called a fatal means of hindering the princess.

"And that's why the intelligence division tried to do something about it. But they failed. I don't know if it's the Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance behind this, but they aren't stupid."

"They're connected by their military network. Even if someone can't hack in from outside, that link can be cut off by sneaking a virus directly into one of the barricade's communications facilities. A single 25 euro chip can bring an end to this."

"And that's what we're on our way to do?"

"If we weren't needed, we wouldn't have been called out here. Also, all eight sites are being infiltrated at the same time. As long as the virus gets in at one of them, we win."

"That means there isn't a problem if seven of the groups fail. Doesn't that make us expendable?"

Quenser was relatively useless in normal combat unrelated to Objects, so Heivia ignored his whining and double-checked the layout of the barricade facility they were about to swiftly attack. He checked the arrangement of people, the patrol routes, the directions and strengths of the lights, the presence of various types of sensors, and so on. When his life was at risk, it looked like a treasure chest of information that he never got tired of looking at.

"I see an unfamiliar armored vehicle. Is that one not from the Capitalist Corporations?"

"Does that make it from the Information Alliance?"

"I'd say so. It's probably an Information Alliance officer's vehicle. He'll be here in order to make sure the Capitalist Corporations goes along with their secret arrangement. It has a lot of antennae on it too. It's probably for a VIP."

"A VIP? So does it have 24/7 air conditioning, a fridge full of sodas, a microwave to reheat fried chicken, a home theater system, internet access, a simple shower, and a sofa that turns into a bed?"

Despite Quenser's comments, his expression showed no jealousy.

"Even if he has a bodyguard team, I can't believe an officer would head alone into the middle of an enemy nation's unit like that. If the Capitalist Corporations changed their mind and decided to get some information from this powerful officer, he could end up on the receiving end of torture and truth serums."

"He was probably ordered here. As we know all too well, if a higher up orders you to do something ridiculous, you can't fight it. …As a student, you may be unaware, but the military is a constrained and harsh place."

"I would never guess that from looking at you."

The two idiots began a light fistfight, but then the hatch for the VIP armored vehicle opened. They frantically resumed observation.

"Wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait! What the hell? She looks twelve. That girl is about the same age as the one we saved from the human traffickers, but she's arrogantly wearing a military uniform."

"As I said, the military is a harsh place."

"Yeah… She's a young Information Alliance officer, so she might be a product of their genius girl project. I don't know the official name, though."

"Why is it limited to girls? Some old man's tastes?"

"You joke, but that might actually be the reason." Quenser's expression was perfectly serious. "It's an issue of the symbolism. There's a lot of difference in nuance between a manly hero standing before the people and a feminine saint standing before them. By showing a delicate, weak, lovely, and fair maiden working towards the war, the people will confuse their desire to protect her with a desire to fight."

"I want to send my applause and a bomb to the person who seriously thought that up. How long will the people continue to be innocently moved by some child actor hired with money?"

"That 'oh ho ho' is a popular idol back in the Information Alliance safe countries. It's no different from that. I hear one's status in the Information Alliance changes based on your ability to insist that clearly deviated justice is correct. Supposedly, a popular dog from some commercials gets better medical care than your average office worker."

Quenser glanced toward the assault rifle hanging from Heivia's shoulder. It was primarily used as a mid-range weapon, but its various sensors allowed it to be used for sniping to a certain extent .

"So are you going to do it? I bet you could shoot her right in the head or heart from here."

"She's just the poor overseer the Information Alliance sent here. She's unrelated to the surrounding barricade, so shooting her won't stop them."

"That's good."

"Tell me about it. We need to thank god that we can actually choose our enemy."

Also, causing a commotion before injecting the virus would ruin any chances of their plan succeeding.

After checking over the entire enemy formation, Heivia slowly stood up.

"Okay, let's get this horrible job over with."

"Are we really going to sneak in there? They'll spot us immediately with those lights everywhere. Shouldn't we at least get an invisibility coat, an infinite health recovery first-aid box, and a charged particle bazooka? It'll be impossible otherwise."

"Shut up. Didn't you know human beings can defeat a demon king with only cotton clothes and a wooden stick?"

Heivia led the way and Quenser followed. Rather than heading straight in, the two of them circled wide to the side as they travelled through the darkness.

The massive amount of light seemed to cut off the barricade facility from the rest of the desert, but that created a large gap

between the lit areas and the unlit areas. And because it was an outdoor facility, the lights did not illuminate everything evenly.

In other words, there were still dark areas.

"(Do you really think we can sneak through the darkness without being noticed? What if there are a ton of sensors that you can't see?)"

"(I'm being careful. But you don't set up traps along animal trails. No one wants the alarm going off all throughout the night because of every little boar and rabbit. While preparing to set up the barricade so quickly, they don't want delicate sensors everywhere. Their own people would be setting off the alarm all the time.)"

Quenser tilted his head, wondering if that was how it worked.

This was hardly the first time, but it was still quite thrilling to entrust his life to something he did not understand himself. However, he did not want to be left behind by Heivia while so close to enemy territory.

"(We can't hide our footprints in the desert.)"

"(They're working all over the place. There are already footprints everywhere.)"

But just as they took the first step, they stopped.

"What?"

Quenser looked around in confusion with his goggles still on his forehead.

He was focusing with his ears rather than his eyes.

"I hear an odd rumbling noise."

"!?"

Heivia immediately pushed Quenser to the ground. While getting down on the cold sand himself, Heivia whispered to Quenser.

"(Hey, you idiot! Turn off all your sensors! Goggles, binoculars, everything!! Don't answer your radio even if our huge-breasted commander calls. We'll be blown to pieces the instant we send out any radio waves, infrared rays, or anything else!!)"

"(What?)"

"(This is no time to be clueless, Quenser. Unless this rumbling is being caused by a legendary dragon, there's only one thing big enough to cause it!!)"

"(Wait a second!!)"

An unpleasant sweat covered Quenser's body in an instant.

But time was not going to wait.

While lying on the sand, he dug through his coat pocket. He pulled out an electric thermometer and stabbed it into the sand.

"(7.5 degrees!)"

"(You're kidding. It was six degrees earlier. Damn, have all these lights raised the ground temperature!?)"

As they whispered back and forth, they reached for a different pocket. What they pulled out was nothing special. It was a cold spray used for wrist sprains and such.

Quenser stabbed the thermometer into his uniform and sprayed the cold spray over his entire body. He sprayed it enough to bring it to 7.5 degrees just like the ground.

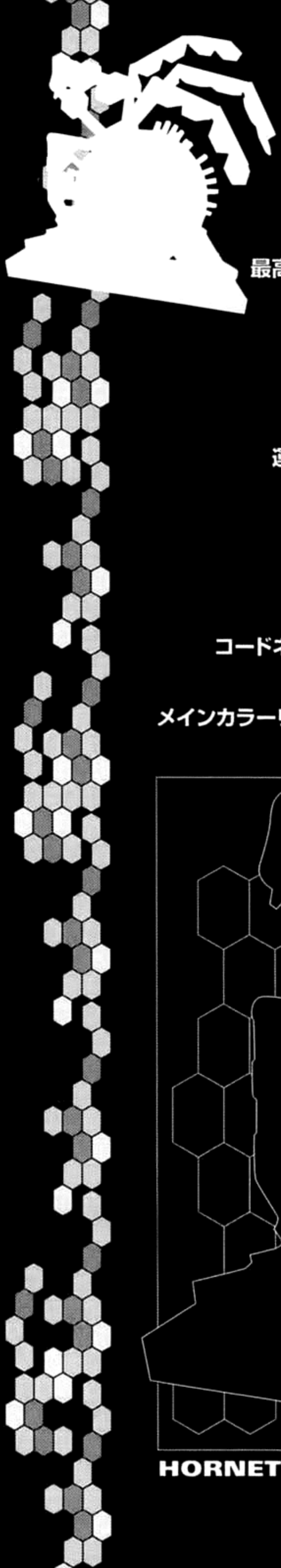
"(Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry!! It's all over if its sensors pick us up!!)"

"(We can do this, but will it really fool that collection of cutting-edge equipment? It has tons of sensors to detect people other than thermo!!)"

"(From what I've heard, it's the type that can detect a mole using a combination of body temperature and electromagnetic field disturbance. All the iron sand in the desert should keep that from working perfectly!!)"

Quenser's ears were slammed by a sound like the roar of the wind or like the air being crushed.

He could not move a finger any more.



【ホーネットストーム】
HORNET STORM

全長…75メートル

最高速度…時速550キロ

装甲…2.5センチ×200層（溶接など不純物含む）

用途…大都市侵攻用対人大規模精密砲撃兵器

分類…水陸両用第一世代（1.5世代との非公式呼称も）

運用者…『資本企業』

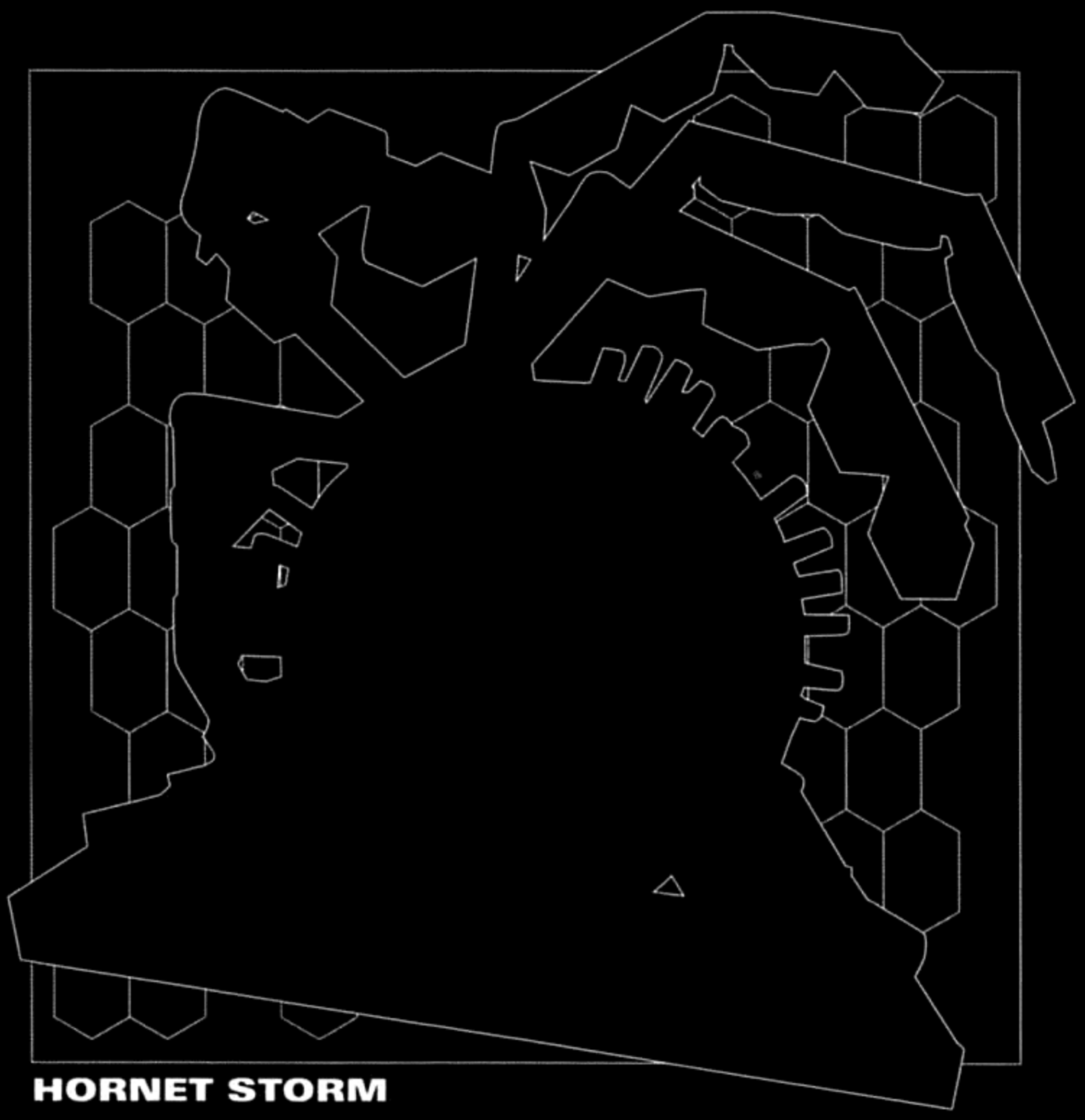
仕様…エアクッション式推進装置

主砲…なし（100以上のレーザー兵器を集束するシステムで代用）

副砲…レーザービーム砲のみ

コードネーム…ホーネットストーム
（敵対者を大量のレーザービーム兵器で蜂の巣にするところから）

メインカラーリング…銀



HORNET STORM

The countless stars and the faintly colored moonlight in the cold desert sky should have spread thinly across the entire area, but a giant shadow seemed to devour one area of that. It was an artificial device. It was a colossal weapon. It was the synonym for war that had brought an end to the nuclear age and still reigned as strongest.

It was an Object.

This was a 1.5 generation Object from the Capitalist Corporations.

"It's just as the final transmission from the missing intelligence division team said." His voice sounded truly unhappy. "That's the Hornet Storm from the Capitalist Corporations. Completely unlike any other Object, that demonic machine was developed to attack large cities."

The giant spherical main body that was the symbol of Objects appeared to be supported by an air cushion propulsion device. The back of the Object was covered by several giant metal panels that looked like a rounded version of peacock feathers.

However…

The biggest oddity about Hornet Storm's design lay elsewhere.

"It's an Object without a main canon," muttered Quenser. "It only has 100 anti-personnel laser beam cannons. When fighting another Object, it uses its peacock feathers to refract and reflect all

of its lasers to create a concentrated attack on a single point of the enemy's armor."

The princess's Baby Magnum also had its main cannon distributed over seven cannons that could be used to cut off the enemy's escape and use the opening to focus an attack on a single point.

However, it was rare to take it to this extreme.

This was similar to tearing everything down to the ground in order to distribute and focus the attacks.

"That weapon wasn't made for a clean war," groaned Heivia. " When a dictator uses all the people in a large city as a shield, that Object can kill him without leaving room for negotiation. This modern day grim reaper can ignore the hostages, charge into the city, and accurately fire on only the target. Once that thing has you located, it can kill you as easily as entering a name into a search engine. It's specialized toward human targets, so you could call it our natural enemy."

Even if its weapons were known as "small" laser beam cannons, that was in reference to Object-sized weapons. A single shot had the destructive power to easily melt a tank or shoot down a fighter.

Each of the 100 cannons could accurately target anything in a five kilometer range and it could penetrate any obstacle to utterly destroy its target. And a flesh-and-blood human could not evade a laser beam cannon that approached at the speed of light.

In a single action, it could accurately and precisely eliminate 100 enemy soldiers.

And what if, with only a few seconds of lag for cooling and re-aiming, it could repeat that action indefinitely?

What if, no matter how many hostages were gathered as shields , it could slip its attack through the gaps and hit only the target?

What if any human counterattack could be completely ignored thanks to the thick armor unique to Objects?

That would no longer be a fight. It would be divine punishment unilaterally poured down on them. In a way, the overwhelming intimidation this brought was more than that of a second generation Object that fought a war in a distant country. That Object could be sent to battlefield or safe country alike. It opposed the idea of the clean war and it was a nightmarish existence for guerrillas and terrorists hiding in cities.

And that Object was calmly crossing the battlefield as its air cushion blasted sand into the air.

Unpleasant sweat covered Quenser and Heivia's bodies as they held their breath and tried to hold onto their lives. It travelled extremely close by the Capitalist Corporations soldiers working to prepare the barricade in the artificial lights.

The countless cannons attached to its spherical main body moved slightly in the darkness and its targeting sensors constantly scanned the ground.

This was the king of the food chain.

It did not run or hide. It simply travelled the world searching for prey.

As Quenser was forced to lie on the ground when faced by its arrogance, he could not even feel frustrated by it all. He could only wait as time passed. He dreamed of the moment when he could think in the past tense that it had left. He wanted to shout out and run away, but he had to desperately suppress that desire.

For five minutes, the Hornet Storm moved slowly as if evaluating its surroundings.

That must have been its standard procedure because the Object did not find any prey and it quickly accelerated away from the barricade facility.

Quenser felt like he could not breathe.

Even after its giant form disappeared beyond the horizon, he did not immediately get up.

"It must be going around to the eight barricades in order like that."

"Yes, but it is estimated to have a top speed of over 550 kph. If the alarm goes off somewhere, it'll be there in no time. We can't use this cold spray forever and there's nowhere to run in the middle of the desert. Once it detects us, our lives are literally over."

"So when will it be back here?"

"If it uses that same pattern for all eight spots, I'd say a little under an hour. Of course, that's assuming we don't trigger the alarm."

They did not want to meet that monster again.

The two of them both wanted to finish their business here as quickly as possible.

The real mission was still to come.

Part 3

In and of itself, their task was simple.

Their enemy was a unit made up of both the Information Alliance and Capitalist Corporations. This unit had the second generation Simple Is Best, the 1.5 Generation Hornet Storm, and the multiple Ex. Wall mobile barricades that would keep their own Object from moving.

It would be difficult for the princess's Baby Magnum to deal with it all on its own, so Quenser, Heivia, and the others were secretly infiltrating the communication facilities for the mobile barricades. By directly injecting a virus into the hardware, control of the barricades could be stolen at the crucial moment.

The mobile barricades would remain within the enemy unit until the battle began. At that point, they would be used to block the movements of the Simple Is Best and Hornet Storm.

Normally, they could be easily blown away with the overwhelming firepower of the Objects, but this would occur in the middle of an Object vs. Object battle. When an instantaneous decision could influence the direction a war was headed, a lag of a few seconds could be fatal.

The primary target was the Information Alliance's Simple Is Best.

The Capitalist Corporations' Hornet Storm was simply trying to take advantage of the situation, so they were likely to swiftly retreat the instant that advantage disappeared. But if it did not, the princess would then have to defeat that 1.5 generation Object.

Even with two Objects attacking at once, the princess had a decent chance of winning as long as they set up the battlefield so she could fight them separately.

"As usual, this is one hell of a blueprint. Was this really simulated on a super computer?"

"Try to think more positively. If they could draw up this blueprint, that means there's at least that much hope left. And complaining isn't going to change anything."

Heivia took the lead and Quenser followed through the moonlit desert. They were already within the grounds of the barricade facility.

The facility itself was meant to allow the preparation of the large truck-like mobile barricades and provide access to the military network, but it had many other buildings and vehicles.

"Why did they prepare such a large area? The barricades are mobile, so they're just going to approach our maintenance base once they're set up. I can understand a convoy, but won't the prefab lodgings be left behind?"

"The barricades are going to gather around an Object to stop it from moving. Staying away from the front lines is safer. They can retrieve the other things once the battle is over."

There were a lot of lights. The gondola-equipped cranes used in place of watchtowers had their own spotlights, the vehicles parked around had headlights, and the large halogen lights usually used for stages and construction sites were set up on large stands here and there.

Heading out into the light would have been suicide and cutting in front of a light would cause a giant shadow.

But the lights were not set up to provide even light and there were spots they missed. By circling behind them and mixing in

with the shadows, Quenser and Heivia's silhouettes were hidden by the bright backlights. Lights that produced a lot of light and heat also helped fool different types of sensors.

Even when they were less than ten meters from enemy Capitalist Corporations soldiers, the soldiers could not see them behind the lights.

While walking across the sandy ground, they spoke quietly to each other.

"We have to inject this virus into their system. Where's the communications facility?"

"That's it fifty meters ahead. That small prefab building. The one with a lot of antennae on the roof."

"Will it also be left behind when the barricades close in?"

"I'm sure they have separate armored vehicles for command control. By dividing the system up, there is less of a risk of being cut off from the military network. Of course, that provides more ways into the system for people like us."

The communications facility was the cornerstone of the mobile barricades, so it had strict security and a lot of lights. They would not be able to reach it by walking through the darkness.

Heivia pointed at a line of military trucks parked nearby.

"Hey, Quenser. Let's hide under those to get close. It'll be harder to spot us than if we walk around with our heads down."

He got down on the fine sand and slid under the back of the nearest truck. That left Quenser with no choice. He imitated Heivia and crawled under the tuck without knowing the right way to do it.

He smelled something that resembled demi-glace.

"Damn them. What do they have loaded in this truck? Why does the enemy get to eat such nice food?"

"They have over 100 people working to set up the barricade. They're probably busy supplying soap and toilet paper too."

Suddenly, they heard footsteps on the sand.

And from more than one person. An unpleasant sweat appeared on Quenser's cheek as he hid under the truck and pressed against the sand.

"(Three, four…no, five. Dammit. This is pretty much up to chance now.)"

As Heivia complained, he pulled his handgun from its holster and attached the suppresser. Quenser's eyes opened wide.

"(If they notice something's wrong, the Hornet Storm will rush over here, remember!?)"

"(I'm not preparing this because I *want* to use it, you idiot!)"

Meanwhile, multiple military boots were clearly headed their way. Not only could they hear the footsteps, they could feel a kind of pressure. These soldiers were not simply walking around the trucks. They were obviously walking toward the trucks.

Quenser squeezed his eyes shut when he saw Heivia holding up his handgun in the cramped space below the truck.

He waited for a while.

But nothing happened.

"…?"

He heard the sound of truck doors opening and closing. The truck above them then creaked like a bed. He doubted it would actually happen, but he felt as if it were going to crush him from above. They were on soft sand rather than hard asphalt, so the space between the bottom of the truck and the ground might not remain the same.

Finally, he realized there was something else he had to focus on instead.

"(Hey, hey! Quenser, you idiot! Pull yourself together!!)"

"(Eh? Ah?)"

"(They just climbed into the truck. Why do you think that is? Unless they're planning to kill some time with some rural car sex, they're going to drive the truck away!!)"

The engine rumbled to life.

As Quenser's lungs filled with the unpleasant smell of exhaust, he desperately suppressed the instinctual urge to cough.

If the truck drove away, Quenser and Heivia would gather more attention than a birthday cake.

Heivia had already started to crawl to the next in the line of parked trucks.

"(Hurry up, Quenser! If you stupidly get caught, it'll put me in danger too, so hurry!!)"

"(Wait, wait, wait! The truck's about to drive off. If I move now, I could be crushed by the tire!)"

"(That's better than having your head filled with holes by tons of bullets bought with the money from the donation boxes next to convenience store registers, isn't it? Quit panicking and get over here!!)"

Quenser felt like he was choosing the better of two deaths as he desperately began to move. He crawled out from under the ominously vibrating truck, passed right by the tire supporting a weight of several tons, and managed to reach the next truck.

He just barely made it out when the truck drove off.

But it was too soon to breathe a sigh of relief.

They once again heard the sound of an engine starting from overhead.

"(What the hell!? What the hell!? What the hell!?)"

"(They're sending out each truck in turn. They might be forming a convoy to drive across the desert!)"

"(What? Was eating all that delicious-smelling food not enough!? A noble like me can't even hope for dessert after a meal!!)"

Quenser and Heivia could not have themselves brought into the open, so they rolled along the line of trucks as the trucks drove off, one at a time.

More than ten trucks left and only two remained.

"(What the hell was that? Is it finally over?)"

"(No, wait a second.)"

In addition to the drivers of the trucks, there had been some soldiers who had helped load wooden boxes and other things into the trucks. They were scattering as they returned to their normal posts.

But…

"Hm?"

A single pair of boots stopped.

The boots had their heels pointed toward the two boys, but they quickly turned 180 degrees. The toes were now pointed their way. The ground had been made of soft sand and the trucks had created tire tracks when driving away, but this soldier may have noticed another unnatural trail as if something large had crawled along the ground.

The legs bent as if the solider were crouching down.

A soldier about their age poked his head down to peer under the truck.

Without hesitation, Heivia fired his suppressor-equipped military handgun into the soldier's face.

Quenser instinctually covered his eyes with his hands.

"(Do you have a death wish!?)"

"(Shut up. If I hadn't done anything, he would have caused a commotion! More importantly, Quenser, you cover up the blood with sand. I'll drag the body under here!!)"

"(You could at least let me be the one to shoot him. The last thing I want is to get killed while cleaning up after you.)"

A shot to the brain did not create as much blood as to the heart. Heivia hid the body under the truck as if moving a sack of flour while Quenser did as instructed and hid the blood with the desert sand.

"Either way, they'll find him as soon as they move the truck. Let 's get this virus in the system and get the hell out of here."

While ignoring the blood on their hands, Quenser and Heivia crawled out from under the truck and approached the nearby single-story prefab building. To keep sand out, the floor was elevated like with buildings along the beach. Quenser hid under the floor while Heivia pressed up against the door. Heivia removed the parabolic microphone from the front of his rifle and tossed it underhand to Quenser. Quenser caught it and pressed the microphone against the floor above him.

(One set of footsteps in each corner save the east. Also, one hard sound. Chair legs maybe? It's near the center.)

After acquiring the necessary information, he jotted down a general diagram, folded the memo into a paper airplane, and threw it to Heivia.

Heivia checked it, jammed a large military knife into the gap of the door, and forcibly destroyed the lock.

Quenser hid under the building for a dozen or so seconds and then approached the door.

He peered inside and saw Heivia had already cleared the room.

"Ugh. There's blood everywhere."

"I'm not planning to send this image into people's living rooms. More importantly, it's time to get to work, Quenser," said Heivia as he swapped out his handgun's magazine.

The prefab room had tables chaotically lined up within. Many different pieces of electronic equipment were placed on top, but there were only two obvious computers. The others were mostly old audio equipment and phantom equipment that radio enthusiasts would pursue within an electronics district.

"Ahh, ahh. Everything's soaked. They're covered in so much red I can't read the displays."

"Don't complain, student. I went to some effort to keep my bullets from destroying the machinery."

Quenser ignored the specialized radio equipment and approached one of the computers. The Legitimacy Kingdom had given him a postage stamp-sized chip with the virus on it. Once he infected the system with it, their job was done.

"Huh? Where's the Shift key on this thing? This one's Esc, right ?"

"This is a Capitalist Corporations machine. It isn't gonna be exactly the same."

"It does have a chip slot though, right?"

The two idiots exchanged a glance and frantically looked around at the outside of the computer. Fortunately, the media type

used here seemed to be common between systems. There was a small slot for inserting the stamp-sized chip.

"Hey, Quenser. Can you actually hack?"

"If I could, I'd be working somewhere that pays better. I just have to leave all the work to the program here."

As he spoke offhand, Quenser typed on the unfamiliar Capitalist Corporations keyboard.

"Let's see… If I just insert the chip in normal mode, it'll be rejected, so I ignore this. I need to reboot, spam the function key to bring up the BIOS screen, and switch the boot device priority so it' ll boot up from the external media."

"Hey, how much longer? They'll discover the dead soldiers from the lack of periodic reports. We need to get ready to leave."

"Wait, wait. I just need to reboot again! Okay, done!! The virus has begun to overwrite the system before the military security can catch it. We can just leave it now!"

After seeing the blinking of the access light move from the stamp-sized chip to the HDD, Quenser removed the chip from the slot.

He moved over to Heivia who had the door cracked open to check outside.

"We just have to leave now. What's our escape route?"

"We can't just walk out."

Quenser and Heivia had slipped past the guards by crawling under the line of military trucks, but all but two of those trucks had left. They could not use that same route.

"Then what do we do?"

"Let's climb into the back of one of the remaining trucks. I doubt they're going to stay here all night."

As soon as he had finished speaking, Heivia crouched down and ran toward canopy-covered back of the truck. Quenser followed and Heivia pulled him up into the truck.

Half of the truck was filled with wooden boxes, but they did not have the warnings about flammability and shaking that boxes of weapons would have.

"Goddammit! It's bananas and milk! Are they preparing a nice healthy breakfast!?"

"Should I go see the base counselor if that combination sounds dirty to me?"

The two idiots opened one of the boxes and quenched their thirst with some of the milk inside refrigerated containers.

Then they waited.

A few footsteps approached the military truck. One toward the driver's seat and two or three toward the back. Heivia hid behind

the boxes and used his knife to silently attack them when they had fully climbed into the truck.

After making sure they were all dead, Quenser approached the front of the truck. He knocked twice on the metal panel dividing the driver's compartment and the back.

The driver mistook it for a sign that they soldiers were all onboard, so he smoothly drove off.

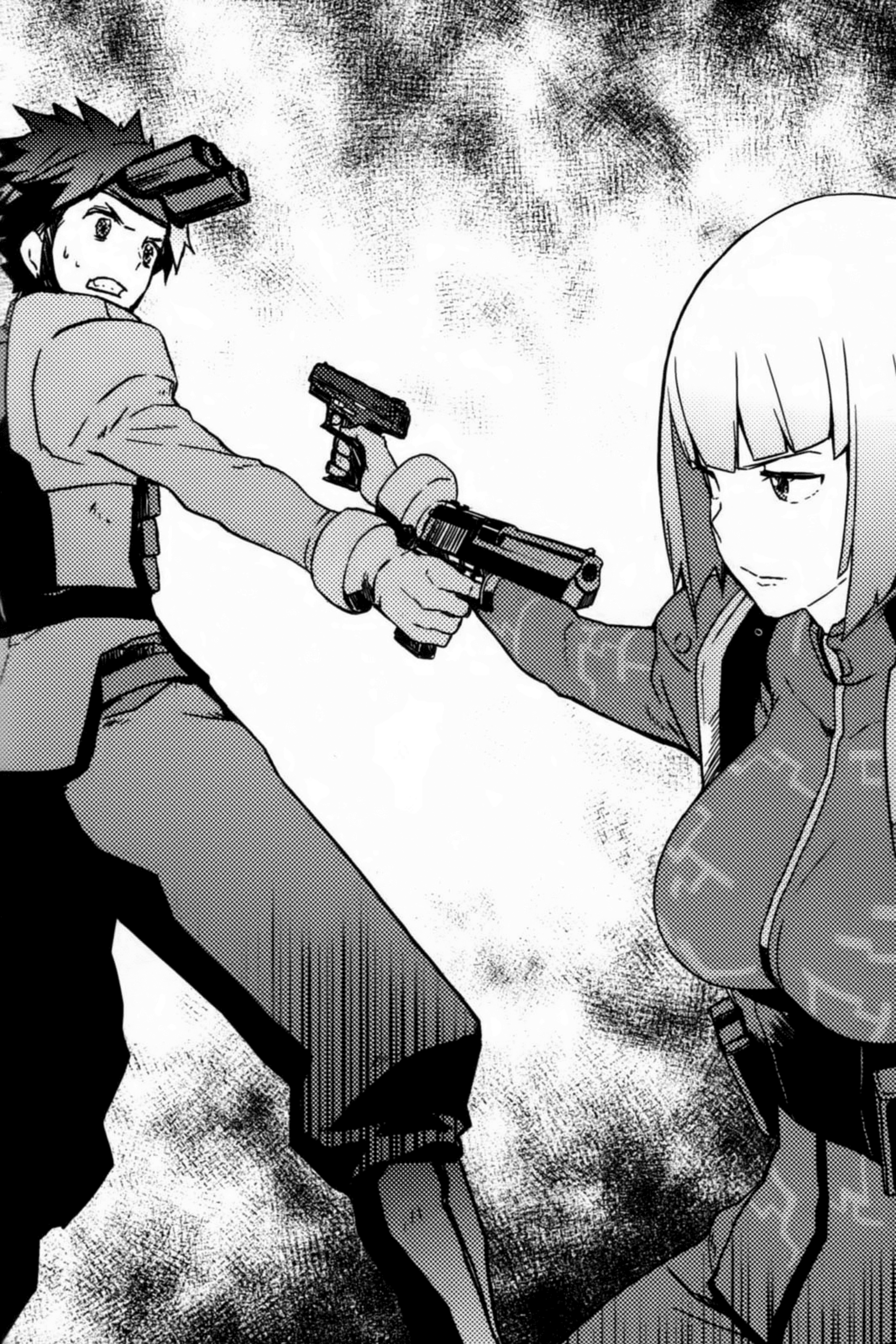
"We need to have a serious discussion about our pay. There's definitely something wrong with you getting paid the same as me. "

"If you have a complaint, go talk to the people that pay us."

That was when they heard an unnatural clunk in the back of the truck.

"!?"

"!!"



Quenser immediately took a defensive stance but was unable to do much of anything. Heivia used an arm and a leg to knock Quenser to the ground and used his other hand to draw his military handgun. He had seen movement behind one of the wooden boxes. Whoever it was must not have thought the box would function as a shield because they swiftly moved to eliminate Heivia.

The two of them held their handguns toward each other at a distance of less than a meter, but they both suddenly stopped moving.

Heivia frowned.

"What? Is that a Legitimacy Kingdom handgun?"

"You aren't from the Capitalist Corporations?"

The person who uttered that confused comment and moved from behind the box (without lowering the gun) was a blonde-haired woman a bit older than Quenser.

Her uniform had a different camouflage design than theirs, but it was a Legitimacy Kingdom format.

The uniform had an unfamiliar emblem sewn into the shoulder.

While lying helpless on the floor, Quenser spoke up.

"Come to think of it, wasn't there an intelligence division team that went in ahead of us and disappeared?"

Part 4

Enough time had passed that the mobile barricade group had likely noticed the dead soldiers. However, the military truck Quenser and the others were aboard had already left the area.

After Heivia decided they were far enough away, he fired a few times toward the driver's seat.

The truck immediately swerved to the side and crashed into a sand dune.

Heivia climbed out of the back of the truck, forced open the driver's side door, and dragged the body out onto the sand.

The blonde woman checked over the body for ammunition, rations, and the like.

"My name is Lisa Deauville. My rank is second lieutenant. I would appreciate it if you would help me handle my team's mistake."

"I'm impressed you managed to escape. What about the others?"

"They were not so fortunate," the intelligence division soldier named Lisa said.

Quenser did not try to ask for further details. There were people at the maintenance base zone who would do that. Right now, he needed to rejoice that even one of them had survived.

He pointed at the truck with his thumb.

"Our vehicle is about ten kilometers ahead. We'll head there, switch vehicles, and return to the maintenance base."

"I'm sure I'll be stuck driving. Hey, Quenser! You sit in the passenger seat to navigate. I'm not gonna let you get a head start on flirting just because you're useless."

After sitting in the driver's seat, Heivia operated the shift lever and freed the truck from the sand dune it had run into. Before the truck even came to a full stop, Quenser grabbed onto the passenger side, opened the door, and tumbled inside.

And then blonde-haired Lisa also sat in the passenger seat by sitting on top of Quenser's lap.

At this point, Heivia pulled out his military knife.

"Quenserrrrrr!!"

"Ask her what's going on, not me!! (I won't deny I like it, though.)"

Even through the thick military uniform, Quenser could feel the unique softness and warmth of a woman.

Lisa, however, showed no sign of being bothered by the situation.

"There are only two seats in here and I cannot assist you from the back of the truck. If I sat in the driver's seat, I would get in the way, so the only possible place for me is the passenger seat."

"Quenser, swap seats with me!! You don't have a license? There 's nothing but desert as far as the eye can see. You just have to step on the accelerator and turn the steering wheel. Anyone can do that !!"

They would be spotted regardless with any cutting-edge sensors, but they still did not have the guts to drive through the desert night with the headlights on.

But as previously stated, the desert was not flat. It had sand dunes with height differences of several meters. It may have been similar to stopping time and driving over the stormy ocean.

And so…

"Ohh, ohhhhh, ohh. Th-this is a very bumpy road. Hey, boy. Stop squirming below me. And why has something been pressing up against my butt for a while now?"

"Don't underestimate adolescence, officer cadet! We can fill the time waiting for the elevator by talking about nothing but a large tree that looks a lot like a woman's waist. You need to be prepared for this kind of thing before you choose to sit on my lap!!"

"At least look at the map, you idiots!! You're pissing me off! Do you want to frighten everyone away by bringing tears and snot to the face of Heivia, the super genius, beautiful, wealthy, athletic noble who will infiltrate enemy territory, rescue hostages, or anything else you need!? Is that what you want!?"

However, there were some things one did not give up even after such a desperate plea.

Quenser was in the same mindset as someone refusing to hand over the bit of ice cream stuck to the bottom of the lid, so he began contemplating pulling out a Hand Axe plastic explosive to stop Heivia from switching seats with him. He also feared the possibility of Lisa alone sitting in the driver's seat. If it came to that , he would bite his own tongue.

"Huh? Wait, Heivia. We need to contact the maintenance base and the princess to tell them we injected the virus and what our escape route is. Once we have control of the mobile barricades, the Baby Magnum can begin its attack and we need to make sure this truck isn't destroyed in the process."

"Don't be stupid!! As soon as the virus took effect, it sent a log from the enemy server to our electronic simulation division! Also! My hands are full driving!! If you need something done, do it yourself!!"

At any rate, they needed to give a report.

There were eight mobile barrier locations. A dangerous infiltration mission had been carried out at each one. If they

reported their success, the other teams could abandon their dangerous mission and leave. He doubted it would happen, but if another team managed to infect the system at the same time (or slightly slower), Quenser did not want them to make the first report and take the credit.

And so Quenser reached for the radio.

"Huh? Damn, I can't reach."

"Of course not. Your arms are wrapped around me like you are holding a log. Do you need a radio? You can use the one in my pocket. It is in the chest pocket."

"Ngh… So it's near your chest? …Is this it? Huh? This is awfully soft…"

"Stop that! Why are you touching my-…no, don't make me say it!"

"Why can't this truck divide down the middle and leave a bike for just me?" grumbled Heivia in the driver's seat.

After some difficulty and some occasional squirming from Lisa, Quenser finally managed to remove the radio from her uniform.

He held it in front of her, set the frequency, and entered the encryption key. Once he secured a mission bandwidth, he brought the radio to his mouth while his face was covered by the blonde hair flowing down Lisa's back.

"This is Team A. Mission complete. The virus has infected the system. We are, um…"

"We're the Capitalist Corporations Steel Father 8-ton truck travelling down route 32 with no lights on. Tell them to make sure the Object doesn't fire on us," supplied Heivia in annoyance.

Quenser began to repeat the information.

"Um, we are the Capitalist Corporations Steel-…"

But then another transmission cut in. It came from one of the teams infiltrating one of the other mobile barricade facilities.

"This is terrible! HQ, can you hear me!? Please respond!!"

"Team F, this is HQ. We can hear you just fine. If there is a problem, it lies in your ability to speak. Simply put: calm down."

"How am I supposed to stay calm!? What the hell is going on?"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance. Lisa reached over from Quenser's lap and used a hand to point Heivia's head back toward the road.

(Did one of the teams screw up and get spotted?)

The virus had already been injected into the Capitalist Corporations military network. There was no reason to continue the infiltration mission any further. Quenser adjusted his grip on the radio to make sure they did not die for no reason.

But then he stopped.

Team F continued their report from another mobile barricade facility.

"We found the missing intelligence division team. We counted, and this is all of them! They're all dead!! Damn them. They gathered all the captured soldiers in one place and 'prepared' them . They ignored all the war treaties and tortured the prisoners!!"

Quenser felt a chill run down his spine.

He felt like he had just learned the cute kitten sitting on his lap was a strange carnivorous beast.

Heivia immediately slammed on the brakes as hard as he could.

As the truck came to a sudden stop as if it had caught on something, Heivia drew his handgun.

But before the boy could aim, Lisa had already accurately pressed her own handgun against his temple.

Unlike Quenser and Heivia, she was not held in place by a seatbelt and the sudden stop could have easily knocked her through the windshield, but she still moved more quickly.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Heivia while almost dumbfounded.

Lisa was obviously more skilled. Heivia must have sensed that fact because he began to sweat.

Lisa showed no sign of caring about Quenser who was held down beneath her butt. She must have thought she could immediately handle any movement he took.

"That report said Team F found the bodies of the intelligence division team. They said they counted them. Then who the hell are you!?"

"I am a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier. I did not lie when I gave you my name and rank."

"Hah! Are you serious? If you weren't up to no good, you wouldn't have pretended to be who we thought you were. There was something you didn't want us to know, wasn't there!?"

"Even if you checked the military database, you would not find any data on me. That is the sort of unit I belonged to! If we had remained back there, we would have been found by the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance who were protecting the mobile barrier. I intended to tell you the truth once we reached safety!!"

"Yeah!? And what is that truth!?"

"I…My unit was-…!!"

Lisa – or the blonde woman going by that name – began to tremble as she started to speak.

But then a giant shell landed near the truck.

It landed to the left from Quenser's perspective.

They were struck by a tremendous impact.

Quenser thought the reinforced glass on the door would shatter instantly, but the entire door came off. The heavy military truck was a mass of metal protected by bulletproof equipment, but the entire thing floated up into the air. In all seriousness, it spun horizontally in midair twice. It landed on the tires, but its momentum caused it to roll on its side.

"Gh…bh!?"

Quenser could not breathe as he was practically hung by his seatbelt. But it was not strangling his neck. The pain came from the pressure to his ribs and lungs.

"What…the hell?"

Quenser heard the high-pitched sound of something breaking. Once he focused on his unsteady vision, he saw Lisa Deauville breaking the windshield. She bent her supple body, slipped through the hole, and escaped into the desert night.

"Get…back here!!"

Heivia broke the windshield and made his way out as well. Quenser was left behind, struggling with his seatbelt.

"Damn… What even happened!?"

Because of the unusual weight on it, the seatbelt would not come undone even once he pressed the button. He searched through his uniform and pulled out the survival kit. There was a small cooking knife inside.

(That was an explosion from a shell… A shell!? It wasn't targeting the truck, but I doubt there's another target in this empty desert. So was it a stray shot? But from who!? Wait… It can't be!!)

He received his answer almost immediately.

A giant form passed by in front of the truck. It was on such a large scale that it could flatten the several meter tall sand dunes. It was a mass of metal and weapons. A massive amount of military budget had been brought together to construct that symbol of war.

It was an Object.

"The princess!?"

It was not just the Baby Magnum. The Object was making constant organic movements to the left and right as if taking the small steps of a boxer or mixed martial artist. Those were evasive actions. And there was only one thing that an Object had to fear taking damage from.

Another giant form was moving quickly through the desert night as if performing an intense dance on a scale of hundreds of meters.

This was the assistance from the Capitalist Corporations.

That urban invasion Object had no main cannon and was deemed generation 1.5.

"The Hornet Storm."

An Object's main cannon could easily hit at a distance of ten kilometers, so seven or eight hundred meters was extremely close range.

At that point, Quenser came to his senses.

"And I'm in the ring with them!!"

He frantically pulled the cooking knife out of his survival kit, but he did not have a chance to use it.

Before he could, the darkness of the desert night was split apart.

He had not seen the attack itself. He had seen the afterimage of the dust and moisture in the air being instantly fried. Several dozen thin orange lines of light gathered together and landed near the truck Quenser was struggling within.

The landing spot produced intense light as if from welding.

But he did not have time to complain about the sudden headache. The massive heat caused the surrounding air to expand, so what resembled a blast of wind struck the truck. The 8-ton truck had already rolled on its side, but this rumbling wind caused it to roll like a plastic bottle. The latch for the seatbelt finally gave out

and Quenser was freed from his bonds. He was then slammed into the driver's side door.

"Gbh!! Damn…it…"

The truck was lying on its side again, so Quenser crawled out the broken windshield.

The two Objects were continuing to fire their giant shells while taking relatively small evasive movements.

Quenser did not know what had triggered the direct conflict.

The Legitimacy Kingdom's electronic simulation division might have noticed the virus was in the system and sent the Baby Magnum out before Quenser and Heivia could report. Or the Hornet Storm might have gotten too close to the maintenance base zone and the Baby Magnum had been sent out without knowing if they could win.

Either way…

(Wait, wait, wait!! We're supposed to be attacking the Simple Is Best that is waiting for a chance to charge in from a distance. If it charges in at supersonic speeds now, the princess will be attacked from two sides at once. Can she really win even with control of the barricades taken!?)

Also, the Legitimacy Kingdom's plan had been to use the mobile barricades to stop the Simple Is Best and have the Baby Magnum destroy it. They would then watch the Hornet Storm and attack it if it decided to continue fighting.

That plan was no longer going to work.

Two back to back battles against a single Object was different from fighting two Objects at once.

"Well, sitting around isn't going to help. I need to contact Froleytia and see if there's anything I can do."

However, he was on the verge of passing out from the intense pain assaulting his entire body. He lay on the cold sand that almost felt frozen and pulled out his small radio.

But then something else happened.

Lisa had escaped and Heivia had pursued her, but the two of them were running back to the truck.

"…?"

Quenser grew cautious even as he lay on the ground.

It was unlikely they had gotten completely turned around in the empty desert. He could only think something had happened. For example, Heivia could have lost his gun, so Lisa was now pursuing him.

(But Heivia had more than just his handgun. Whether his gun jammed or he had it shot out of his hand like a movie villain, he would just have to switch to his assault rifle.)

But Quenser did not have time to think.

He did not know who Lisa Deauville was, but she was likely an enemy.

As tension ran through his body, he pulled out a Hand Axe plastic explosive and a ballpoint pen-shaped electric fuse, but then something unexpected happened.

Heivia ran right past Quenser.

And just before doing so, he frantically shouted to his terrible friend.

"You idiot!! How long are you going to sit there!?"

"…?"

He wondered if the other two had agreed to flee to safety due to the two Objects.

He was partially right and partially wrong.

After a few seconds, Quenser finally realized what Heivia and Lisa were running from.

The ground was disappearing.

A strange sand waterfall had appeared maybe 100 meters away and more and more of the ground was disappearing into the depths. The region was expanding and it was approaching where Quenser lay.

"Wh-what is that!?"

"How should I know? There must have been something under the desert and the Object fight caused it to collapse!!"

Surprisingly, it was Lisa who answered his question.

Not only that, the blonde beauty stopped in front of him, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to his feet.

"Are your legs hurt? I can't escape the collapse while carrying you. If you don't want to be caught in the middle of it, then run! Right now!!"

Still not knowing what was going on, Quenser retreated along with Lisa.

The collapse of the fine sand continued behind them. They had no idea how far they would fall if it caught up to them, but it was certainly more than a few meters.

"What is this!? Did a natural cave start to spread!?"

"I said I don't know! It might be manmade, but this is no time to worry about that!!"

"Dammit. I thought it was supposed to be tungsten below our feet!"

"What are you talking about!?"

In a desert of nothing but fine sand, there was no meaning in making maps with detailed contour lines. The desert was commonly compared to a stormy sea and the strong wind continually changed the terrain just like one. Dunes several meters tall were easily formed. It was possible a warehouse or factory had been completely hidden below the sand.

"Heivia, wait up! Don't escape on your own!!"

"Shut up!! This is divine punishment! The crime of flirting deserves death! Don't get someone as cool and stoic as me involved in your punishment!!"

The coldhearted boy's back was a long way ahead.

Suddenly, the two Objects continuing their battle beyond the collapse sent a frightening stray shell in their direction. The shell landed over three hundred meters to the side, but it was still enough to send Quenser's entire body into the air. For an instant, he had difficulty breathing. He rolled across the ground and Lisa tried to pick him up.

But that was a mistake.

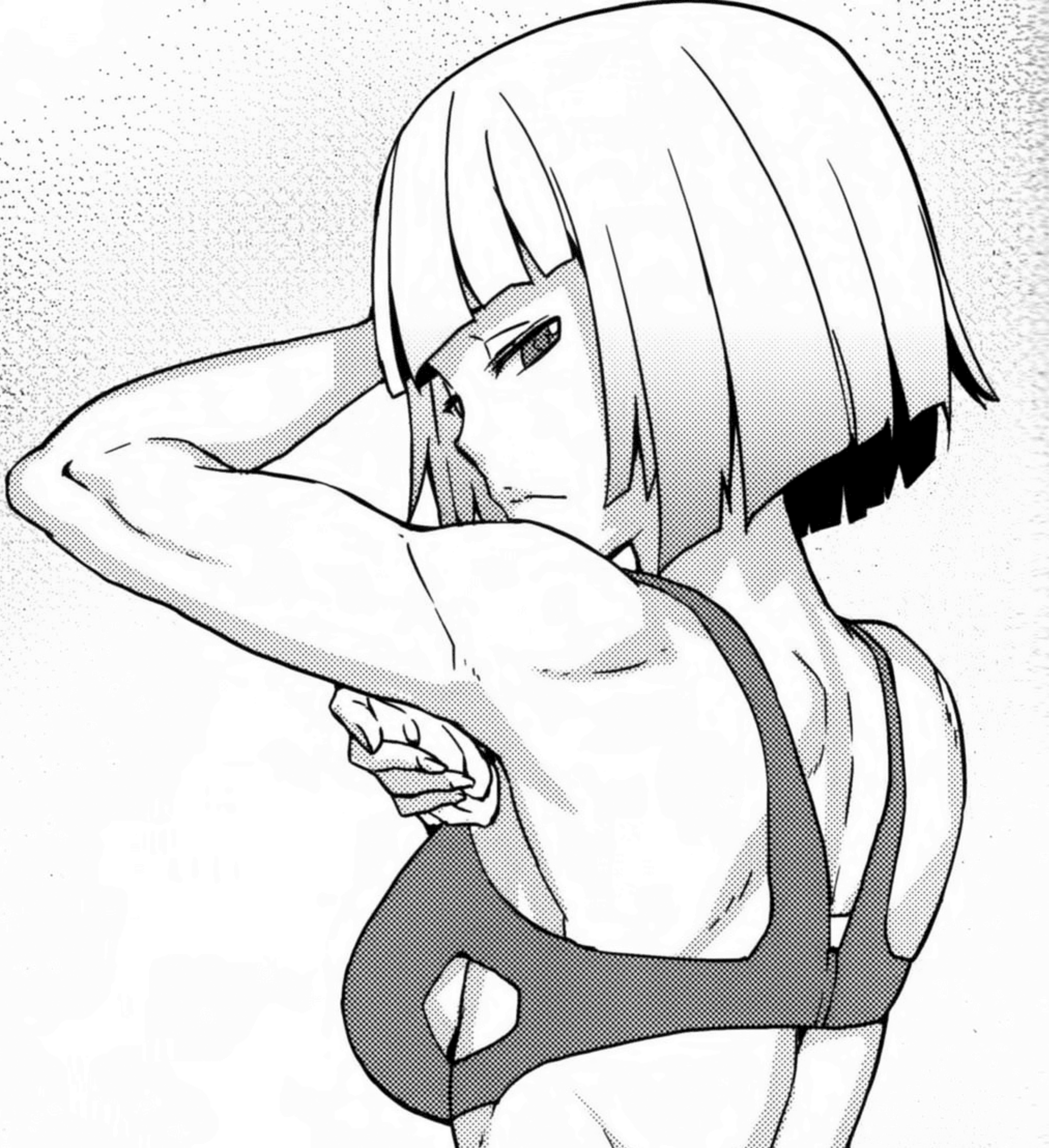
The maw of the collapse caught up. He felt the ground disappear below him. It was less a vertical waterfall and more of a

steep waterslide. Quenser and Lisa were mercilessly dropped into the abyss that light could not reach.

Part 5

Quenser had passed out, so he did not know how much time had passed.

"Gh…"



He groaned and brought a hand to his forehead. He did not know how far he had fallen. He was lying on some kind of floor, but he still did not feel stable. It felt like being on a small rocking boat. He had a strong urge to vomit.

He had no intention of suffocating on his own vomit, so he ignored his aching head and forced himself to sit up.

Lisa Deauville had the top of her uniform removed and was wiping her underarm with a wet towel.

"…Hm?"

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!? Why am I the one screaming and why are you the one staring in confusioooooooooooooooonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnr!?"

"Is your mind still muddled? You still have your memories, I hope. I do not want to explain everything from the beginning."

Lisa did not seem to care that Quenser had seen her. She finished wiping the sweat and sand from her upper body and put her uniform back on.

Quenser began to back away from her as he did not know who she truly was, but he stopped when an intense urge to vomit rose up from his stomach.

He could not suppress it, so he turned his head aside and vomited profusely.

"It looks like you hit your head. If you have the rations to spare, you should wait until you finish vomiting and then consume the nutrients your body needs to stabilize itself. You should also make sure there is no blood in your vomit, just to be safe."

"Wh-who…"

Quenser reflexively reached for his plastic explosives and realized how odd it was his weapons had not been taken from him .

"Who are you? Why did you save me back there?"

"I am Lisa Deauville, a second lieutenant in the Legitimacy Kingdom military. Those two facts remain unchanged. In which case, do I need a special reason to save a fellow soldier? I think abandoning you would cause more problems later on."

She referred to him as a soldier, so she did not know that he was a battlefield student.

There were at least a thousand people in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, so not everyone knew about Quenser. There were a lot of soldiers Quenser had never seen and did not know the name of. It was too soon to jump to any conclusions.

"But I am from a different type of unit than yours," she continued. "It is not registered in the standard military database. Without access privileges above a certain level, there is no way for me to prove my identity right now."

"Only the people who believe in the UFO development unit would believe such a suspicious story."

"I hear that a lot."

Lisa shrugged and leaned her back against a broken pillar. Quenser looked around once more and found they were in some kind of giant warehouse that had completely lost its roof due to the sand.

"July: western Indian Ocean. October: the underground resource extraction plants in the Greenland Sea. November: the Alaska region. January: the Southern Atlantic Ocean region."

"?"

"You're a soldier, right? Haven't you memorized the battlefields where we have lost?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That is where I work."

Lisa picked up a water bottle she had likely used to wet the towel from earlier and took a gulp.

"My mission was to bring paint into Oceania."

Quenser had heard of peaceful missions to bring teaching materials, art supplies, and picture books into battlefields to provide humanitarian aid.

But Lisa was talking about something completely different.

"I was part of the Stalk Killer Unit. You could say I was an expert in withdrawing from the battlefield. Once a battle was deemed lost, someone like me would be secretly sent in. My objective was to keep the enemy army from capturing high-ranking officers, pilot Elites, or important technology related to Objects. In other words, it was a disgusting dirty job of choosing my allies and helping them escape," she spat out.

Quenser frowned.

"Withdrawing from the battlefield? But this is the age of clean wars fought with Objects. The wars are fought between Objects and once the result has been reached, you send out the white flag signal and leave. We shouldn't need a unit specialized in withdrawing from the battlefield."

"If you seriously believe that, you are quite a naïve boy. Real wars are made so they will occasionally destroy all rationality. It's no different than the certain percentage of defective electronics created in factories."

"…"

When he thought about it, Quenser realized that had been the case when the Water Strider had pursued them in the Alaska region. The white flag signal only worked if there was mutual trust between both sides. And what Quenser and the others were fighting was a war.

"The military has to lose their pursuers. Simply hiding your tracks is not necessarily enough. You lay countless traps to crush the pursuing hunters. For example, we might set up one or two thousand bombs while cutting across an abandoned city. And they are not set up so anyone can see them. That is where the 'paint' comes in."

"You camouflage them?"

Quenser pulled out the hand axe plastic explosives that he normally used.

If it was shaped with a spatula and colored with paint, it could be made to look like a stone on the road, a piece of broken asphalt, or a piece of styrofoam. If it was made to match the situation and had shadows and stains added on, it could blend into the landscape even for high-quality cameras. That made them no different from the props used for TV and movies. Just like a beer bottle made from candy or a wound made from red food coloring and bandages, no one would notice the bomb set up right next to them.

They would not suspect a thing until it actually detonated.

Lisa let out a heavy sigh.

"A foolish noble decided to make a quick visit to Oceania to gain popularity. The information got out and a group of local guerrillas or possibly disguised Information Alliance soldiers surrounded them. The Stalk Killer Unit was sent into a hellish battlefield as usual. It would have been difficult to escape with any

normal means, so our leader said we would pass through a complicated urban area and escape to the nearest Object maintenance base. …And we would of course be laying tons of traps and bombs to lose our pursuers."

"You don't mean…"

"I advised him to reconsider." Lisa placed a hand on her head as if grabbing at her blonde bangs. "The traps are effective, but they do not choose who falls for them. Even if the area was still going through war recovery, life had returned to the city. The people living there were forced to gather anything rare or valuable so they could sell it. It was obvious what would happen if we set up one or two thousands bombs that perfectly blended into the scenery. The city that was finally recovering its smile would be filled with blood and screams. Our real enemy would step over the writhing victims and safely pursue us through the path that was now free of bombs. I told our leader it was meaningless."

Had they settled on that inhumane means of withdrawal and succeeded?

That thought entered Quenser's mind for an instant, but he denied it himself.

If so, Lisa would not be here.

"I do not remember what exactly pushed it over the edge, but our argument crossed a certain line. I swear to you, it was our leader who pulled his gun first."

But it was Lisa who was alive here now.

Quenser did not know how hopeless her situation was and how many "allies" she had been surrounded by, but if what she said was true, she must have won that nightmarish firefight.

That action had not had an obvious merit.

It had not even been based around the honor that was so popular in the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Lisa had simply stopped her unit from going too far and protected the many civilians who would normally have not been in any danger of being lost.

And to do so, she had shot and killed many allies who had trusted her.

"Then why had you infiltrated the Capitalist Corporations' mobile barricade facility? That doesn't make sense."

"I was not trying to infiltrate it. As I travelled through the desert to reach a Legitimacy Kingdom base, they set up their unit in my path. …In fact, your maintenance battalion is pretty much the same."

"?"

"As you said, this is the age of clean wars. There are people who do not want it to get out that there are constant inhumane missions that ignore the white flag. There are high-ranking members of the military who do not want it to get out that they have been sending

out a unit like mine while also claiming to be fighting a clean war. That would be admitting that they have been lying about the clean wars. In the end, I have become an inconvenience to both my enemies and my allies."

Her enemies were the Information Alliance and the Capitalist Corporations.

Her allies were the Legitimacy Kingdom.

"There is a contradiction in the structure of the wars and I am a symbol of that contradiction. By taking actions that show I have left the military's control, I have made those high-ranking officials scared, so it seems they will do anything to kill me. By killing me, they can avoid having my information get out."

Quenser thought about what Lisa was saying.

"You mean the Ex. Wall barricades here and the battle beginning tonight are nothing more than preparations for a single goal?" muttered Quenser blankly. "You mean it's all to assassinate you? Not just the Baby Magnum, but the Simple Is Best and Hornet Storm, too? This entire battle including three Objects was set up to make sure a single runaway soldier is killed!?"

Three Objects was a large enough force to start a large-scale war .

What she was saying was similar to attacking a country with a nuclear weapon in order to kill a single individual.

"That isn't something a base commander could do. Only someone directly involved in a much larger power balance could bring together multiple world powers like that. The local commanders are unaware that I, the true target, am on the battlefield. They will simply carry out the camouflage mission given to them. So do not doubt any of the superior officers that you have actually met. That would be meaningless."

She was implicitly covering for the princess and Froleytia.

But Quenser had never thought either of them were the type to be involved in that kind of conspiracy.

"What are we supposed to do?" groaned Quenser. "You say you're a survivor of a withdrawal unit not in the military database. And this battle between three Objects is all to kill you and you alone? That's crazy. Is there any way for a flesh-and-blood soldier to survive that?"

"Are you actually willing to believe me now?"

"I have no objective proof," immediately spat out Quenser. "But that was not an act when you tried to help me from the collapse earlier. Even Heivia was abandoning me in that situation. If you were from the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance and pretending to be an ally, you wouldn't need to do that."

"I see," muttered Lisa under her breath.

That was when the underground structure rumbled ominously.

The deadly Object battle was continuing up above.

"We can take our time to see if you're telling the truth once we get back to the maintenance base zone. The problem right now is how to survive this battle!! The Baby Magnum is still battling the Hornet Storm. To take advantage of that situation, the Simple Is Best will charge in faster than the speed of sound! If that happens, it's all over. I doubt our princess can withstand an attack from two sides at once and everything will be blown away if she's defeated! I will, you will, and everyone in the maintenance base will!!"

"…"

Lisa remained silent for a moment as she thought.

But she soon raised her head.

"No, it isn't over yet. I won't let it end like this."

"What?"

"Come with me. Whatever happens, we need to get out of this underground structure first."

Lisa led the way and Quenser followed her through the strange abandoned building.

It was a giant space that was over three hundred meters long.

"It looks like some kind of storage base. It may have belonged to the old military government," said Lisa as they cut across the sand-filled structure without a light.

After a while, they found a rectangular corridor that led to a rusty staircase leading up.

They carefully climbed the stairs while making sure they did not break through them.

Once they reached the surface, Quenser finally realized where they were.

"This belongs to the pipeline cutting across the desert."

"I think this was originally a terminal facility for drawing up water from unused water veins and sending it to food supply bases. You could call it an extremely forceful and large-scale well. Even if this is a desert, weren't they afraid of the ground sinking down?"

This facility was rusted and falling apart and the ceiling had caved in. Heivia had joked about ghosts, but that building could easily collapse on its own at any time. Heivia had not been entirely wrong because it could be called a "mass producer of ghosts".

Once they left the abandoned facility, they saw a large cloud of sand rising into the air.

It was 500 to 700 meters away.

"That's them. That's the Baby Magnum and Hornet Storm!!"

"You said another one was coming, right? Was it called the Simple Is Best?"

Suddenly, static came from Quenser's radio.

Froleytia's shouting voice followed.

"The Simple Is Best has begun to move! It is travelling south from Route 09 to 37!! If our calculations are correct, it will reach the princess in less than three minutes!! All soldiers in between, make sure you are not caught in the middle!!"

"It's begun," muttered Quenser. "Once the Hornet Storm and Simple Is Best are both attacking her, it's all over! Dammit. I want to support the princess, but we don't even have any information on a weakness!!"

"…"

Lisa then took an odd action.

She crouched down and pulled something from the ankle of her uniform's pants.

What she now held in her palm was not a small handgun or knife.

Neither of those would be any help when an Object was attacking.

She held a cylinder about as thick as a coin and as long as a ballpoint pen.

"Boy, you do not need a sign. Just run as quickly as you can from here right this instant. Get as far from me as you can."

"What are you-…?"

"Weren't you listening?"

Lisa's voice grew firm as she removed something like a lid from the cylinder. But the cylinder was not a container and so it was not accurate to call it a lid.

It was an abrasive surface.

Or perhaps it could be called a means of ignition.

"This entire battle was set up to kill me and prevent my information from getting out. The people actually fighting here do not know that, but the schemers behind the scenes should give some clever instructions once they see their true target. …And if they target me, it will cease to be a two-on-one battle!!"

A solid sound rang out.

At the same time, an unnaturally red flame as if from a firework burst from the end of the cylinder. It was hard to tell because it was night, but a lot of chemically colored smoke had likely burst out as well.

"A flare!? You idiot! If you use that here-…!!"

"You're the idiot!! It's not too late, so get as far from me as you can!! Right now!! Save yourself!!"

As she shouted, Lisa ran toward the intensely fighting Objects.

There was nothing Quenser could do.

The military satellites, the Objects' sensors, and the sensors on the guns of the soldiers that might be lurking in the darkness would all have picked up the heat and light from the flare.

Through some route or another, that information reached someone.

A moment later, the state of the battle rapidly changed.

It was like watching an obvious farce or a fixed match.

The Hornet Storm fired countless laser beams chaotically into the desert night. Those attacks were little threat to the Baby Magnum, but it still moved slightly to evade them. Once the orange beams of light missed their target, they struck the desert. With a flash of light as if from welding, the air explosively expanded and a frightening shockwave spread throughout the entire area.

Quenser's human eyes were not enough to view everything that happened.

But he saw one thing for sure: a puny blonde human was tossed into the air like a poorly made paper airplane in the wind.

"Goddammit!"

The color white filled Quenser's mind.

The Baby Magnum had been placed in a situation formulated to be difficult, but Quenser threw away the situation that gave her a way out. He also threw away what Lisa herself had just said. The next thing he knew, he was running.

"Goddammiii

"Run…"

The smoke and flames from the flare had vanished.

But not because its effective time had ended.

"The ones behind this have lost control of themselves…after seeing the prey…they want so badly. This irregularity…will be quickly fixed. Once their rotten rationality recovers…systematic destruction will cover…this entire area."

It was gone.

It had been destroyed.

Both the flare and the entire arm that had been holding it were gone. The point from which the arm had been torn had twisted around like a rag being wrung. For better or for worse, this had prevented too much blood loss.

"Is there any meaning to this?"

Quenser frantically pulled out his survival kit. He could not close up the wound with a needle and thread, much less with a bandage. He rethought his plan and realized his only choice was to wrap the bandage under her arm and around her entire body. By tying it tightly, he could constrict the thick artery.

"Is there any meaning to this!? This won't even buy 20 seconds. The slight wave will quickly be smoothed out! The princess is struggling against the Hornet Storm and the Simple Is Best is

charging in at faster than the speed of sound!! That situation isn't going to change. Throwing a float to someone out in a storm isn't going to save them, so why did you throw your own life out into the water! Do you want to drown that badly!?"

"The Stalk Killer Unit said the same thing."

Lisa smiled weakly with blood splattered on her cheek.

It was unclear if she could even see Quenser in front of her.

"But it seems this is my nature. There are times…when I suddenly hate that kind of logical thought. Ahh, maybe I'm not suited…to being a soldier."

Lisa had not done anything wrong.

She had simply been the single person to give the correct answer among the majority who agreed to the wrong answer.

"And there *was* meaning."

"What meaning?"

"I was able to speak with you. I told you that the Stalk Killer Unit brought a lot of paint into this country… I may not have escaped the ones behind all this, but I was able to tell the truth to one person. That makes this…my victory. This was enough."

This was the result.

She had tried to protect the civilians from being indiscriminately slaughtered by countless booby traps and she had tried to protect Quenser and Heivia's unit after running across them on the battlefield. She had always been the only one to reach the correct answer and she was going to breathe her final breath while all alone like this.

Was that okay?

Could Quenser accept a world like that?

"Promise me."

"…?"

"Once this battle is over and you somehow – it doesn't matter how right now – managed to survive, promise me you will appear at a court martial. Use that official stage to reveal everything that you've seen!! Tell everyone about the special unit for withdrawing, tell them everything the Stalk Killer Unit has done, and tell them about the people working to hide that truth!! Tell them everything. Can you promise me that!?"

"What difference will it make…?"

"I'll make a promise, too. I promise I'll do whatever it takes to get you to that courtroom!!"

Lisa's mind was muddled by the intense pain, but her eyes opened slightly.

Quenser placed her back on the sand and slowly stood up.

He had made up his mind.

In the current situation, he could not save Lisa.

Forcibly cutting off the artery under her arm to stop the bleeding would only last for fifteen minutes. If she was not brought to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion in that time, she would die. There would be no miracles or coincidences; she would simply die. But the base could not send a helicopter for her due to the Object loaded with the absolute anti-air weapons that were lasers. Given the distance, there was not enough time for a military vehicle to drive out to them. There was a huge difference between a helicopter that could move at 300-400 kph and a vehicle that could only travel at 150 kph. And the vehicle's speed would be cut in half or even more in the desert.

In other words, the situation had to be resolved in only a few minutes.

The Baby Magnum and the Hornet Storm were close by and the Simple Is Best was approaching from afar. He had to end that nightmarish battle between three Objects.

"Can you hear me, princess?" As he spoke quietly into his radio , his blond hair blew in the cold wind of the desert night. "Don't think about the Simple Is Best. Do everything you can to defeat the Hornet Storm in a one-on-one battle. If you're fearing an attack from two fronts, you can't use your full potential and you can't defeat the Hornet Storm. That's an irregular Object designed to

attack large cities. It can be used against other Objects, but that isn't its main purpose. It should be easier than battling a second generation Object."

"Of course I will win. What is your point?"

"I'm saying we can distribute the work," he stated as if spitting out the words. "You handle the Hornet Storm and I'll destroy the Simple Is Best that's at the root of all our problems here."

Part 6

In the desert night, the temperature was 7.5 degrees Celsius.

There was inferior tungsten in the ground.

The only landmarks were the rusted and broken pipeline cutting across the desert and the abandoned large-scale pump facility that brought agricultural water up from unused water veins and was currently hidden underground.

That facility and the attached structures formed a large manmade space underground.

"Heivia. Heivia!! I know you're out there. Answer me!!"

"Yeah, I can see you. I've got the scope trained on your face. But let's be serious here. I am *not* meeting up with you! Being anywhere near you has never ended well. You can call it cowardly or whatever, but I'm going to hide in the background until the danger has passed. I'm not listening to any complaints!!"

The Legitimacy Kingdom's first generation Baby Magnum and the Capitalist Corporations' 1.5 generation Hornet Storm were still battling.

The Hornet Storm used laser beams and had no main cannon, so it used a peacock feather like structure to reflect and concentrate its 100+ secondary cannons in order to pierce Object armor.

The several people manipulating the situation behind the scenes were trying to assuredly and naturally assassinate Second Lieutenant Lisa Deauville, the sole survivor of the Legitimacy Kingdom military's secret withdrawal unit named the Stalk Killer Unit.

Great damage had been done to the surroundings after laser beam cannons were fired across the desert while disguised as stray shots.

The power of the weapons was frightening and the targeted points on the desert formed a thin film of glass after being instantly melted and re-cooled.

"That's fine. I'll destroy the Simple Is Best on my own."

"I've been wondering, is there a screw loose in your head?"

"But first, I want to ask you about the tungsten you mentioned earlier!!"

"Are you planning to gather it to pay off the enemy? Give up now. Didn't I tell you it isn't pure enough to be sold?"

The Baby Magnum could handle just the Hornet Storm, but it had almost no chance of winning when the Information Alliance's second generation Simple Is Best charged in from afar.

Quenser's top priority target was the Simple Is Best.

That true monster was a 50+ meter mass of metal that weighed over 200 thousand tons, but it used its air cushion engine and several high-output ion thrusters to reach a top speed that exceeded 1200 kph.

It had thick additional armor on the front that resembled a beak. That armor gathered thin metal leaf like a phonebook. When it detected an attack from an Object, it would use explosives to release the surface level of metal leaf before the impact could reach the inside. It was a collection of reactive armor technology. Firing a main cannon on it again and again might eventually break through , but it would reach close range with its ultra-high speed before that happened.

You could see it coming a long way off, but no attack would stop it. This demonic machine was most effective when used against another Object rather than against normal weaponry.

"I have no interest in mining it. I just need to know how deep it is. Is it in a tunnel or is it open-air!?"

"It's open-air. The vein reaches the surface. You only need to dig in with a bucket or something. But, Quenser, there isn't

enough to use! Look around you. It's nothing but dry sand. What good is it if there's a few tiny pieces of tungsten or some wolframite ore mixed in!?"

"That's fine. That's just one less thing to worry about."

"Wait. What are you thinking?"

Its main cannon was a low-stability plasma cannon. By firing it at almost point blank range, it ensured it could pierce the enemy Object's thick armor. When used in such a violent and reckless way, it was less a projectile and more of a giant pile bunker made of plasma.

Because the Simple Is Best moved at such ridiculous speeds with such a large form, it experienced massive inertial forces. That prevented it from making the minute footwork common to Objects .

If it did not destroy its target on the first pass, it would be forced to expose its defenseless back. It could maintain its supersonic speed, leave the area of danger, and make a second charge after recovering, but it could not avoid damage to its defenseless back if its enemy used a laser beam main cannon.

"That's the bottleneck for the Simple Is Best."

"What!?"

"It's over fifty meters tall and weighs over 200 thousand tons, but it charges in a straight line while breaking the sound barrier. It'

s a frightening monster to imagine, but a bit of thought reveals something odd."

"Wait. Do you mean…?"

"Air resistance. An Object's main body is spherical. If that giant mass travels at over 1200 kph, it will whip up a massive amount of air. You would expect it to be lifted up into the air. In other words, it has to have something to press itself against the ground as the wind tries to lift it up. If I can destroy that, the giant system known as the Simple Is Best won't be able to continue."

"That's nothing but wishful thinking and wishful thinking is the sign that you're beginning to lose in a casino. An Object weighs over 200 thousand tons. Its own weight might keep it pinned to the ground."

"No, it doesn't. It uses enough ion thrusters to reach supersonic speeds. The larger the body, the more it will disturb the air while moving so fast. It's overkill. This is like those crazy custom cars that enthusiasts love. They're taking something that would normally fly into the air and they're forcibly pinning it to the ground."

"Then where is this supposed weak point?"

"This is the cornerstone of the machine. They would use the strongest and least likely to break part."

"You mean…"

"It has to be the additional armor on the front. That beak-like thing is being used to control the flow of air and have it pass over the Object. That air presses it down and prevents the Object from floating up."

"So if you destroy that solid beak, the Simple Is Best will lose its balance and collapse?"

This battle was in retaliation for Quenser and Heivia crushing the Information Alliance's intelligence plan to expand their influence by secretly working with an Oceanian human trafficking organization.

The Information Alliance's Simple Is Best was one thing, but the Capitalist Corporations' Hornet Storm had no active reason to fight. It simply wanted to destroy the strategically dangerous Baby Magnum while it had the chance.

If the Simple Is Best, which was crucial to the strategy, was destroyed, that advantage would vanish.

If the Hornet Storm did not want to risk its life on the battle and it retreated, that was fine. And even if it continued fighting, the Baby Magnum was not in too much danger against it alone.

The secret objective of the battle was to naturally assassinate Lisa, but it would no longer be "natural" if the given official reason for the battle was lost. Some unseen person would gnash their teeth and be forced to withdraw.

"But how are you going to destroy its front armor!? That thing's a crystallization of reactive armor tech that will instantly detonate and purge the surface layer of metal leaf before any damage is transmitted through. Even after ten or twenty direct hits from an Object's main cannon, the beak silhouette isn't gonna change. How is a normal person supposed to stand up to that!?"

"…"

"Not to mention that it's charging in faster that the speed of sound right now. You don't have time to set your bombs on it. Not even a ninja from a certain island nation could cling to that thing! You'll just be flattened like you were hit by a fly swatter!!"

Even if a battlefield student armed with bombs stood up to it, the Object would not even glance in his direction. And despite not focusing on him, he would still be turned to mincemeat the instant it hit him.

With its size, it could literally flatten your average building or vehicle.

"The wind is nice tonight. Luck is on my side."

"Have you gotten lost in a fantasy world now?"

"Do you know about the machine tool known as a water jet? It fires ultra-high pressure water like a laser to cut apart sheets of

metal. Now, do you know what modification they make to the water jet in order to let it cut through thick materials it would otherwise fail to cut?"

"What are you talking about!? Have you gone crazy from fear!? "

"I'm saying the conditions are just right."

Quenser pulled out a clay-like Hand Axe plastic explosive and stabbed a pen-like electric fuse into the center.

"Here, piggy piggy. It's time for your fat body to fill my stomach."

Part 7

【シンプルイズベスト】
SIMPLE IS BEST

全長… 125メートル

最高速度… 時速1350キロ（高出力イオンスラスター最大展開時）

装甲… 2.5センチ×250層（溶接など不純物含む）＋
特殊前面装甲0.5センチ×2000層（爆薬など不純物含む）

用途… 対オブジェクト戦特化兵器

分類… 水陸両用第二世代

運用者…『情報同盟』

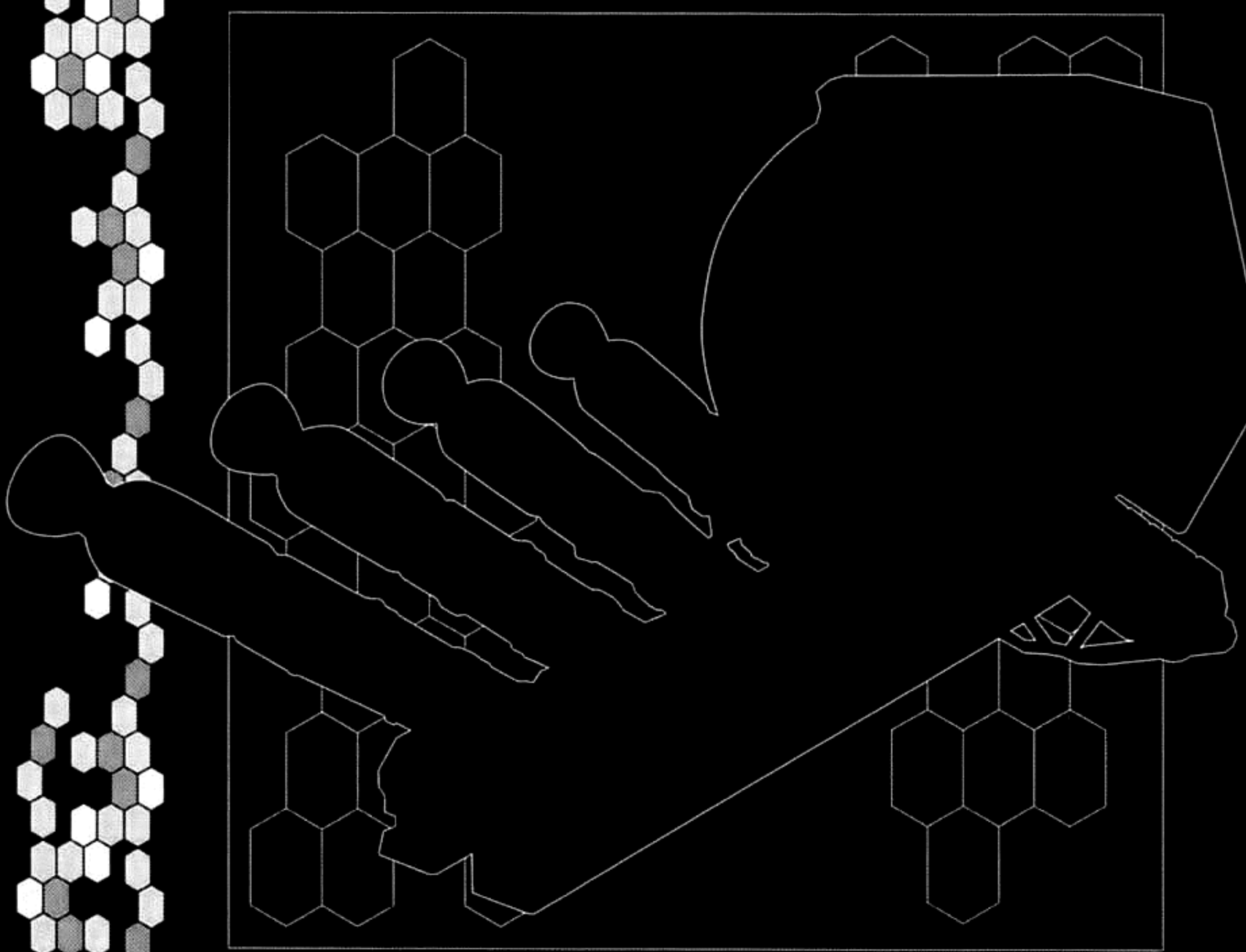
仕様… エアクッション式推進装置＋高出力イオンスラスター

主砲… 下位安定式プラズマ砲×1

副砲… なし

コードネーム… シンプルイズベスト（その真正面からの突撃戦法から。なお、
『信心組織』からは死神を意味するグリムリーパーと呼称されている

メインカラーリング… 白



SIMPLE IS BEST

The Elite finished checking the weather conditions using the reflections of microwaves or infrared lasers.

He ignited thrusters one through four.

He began to charge in.

He calculated the distance to his target in real time.

He worked to maintain a fan-shaped area he could move to in response to his target's predicted evasive actions.

He corrected the data.

He would arrive in 180 seconds.

"…"

A great noise exploded within the cockpit.

Unlike a normal Object, the Simple Is Best did not need to evade the main cannon attacks from the enemy Object. In fact, it could not evade them. If it attempted the quick footwork of a boxer or mixed martial artist at the speeds it moved at, it would lose its balance and collapse.

It felt similar to shining a searchlight on an enemy.

Or perhaps it was closer to using a camera and radio control to correct the course of a free-falling bomb.

The Elite only needed to make slight adjustments to the direction of his Object in order to pursue the fleeing enemy Object. By keeping the enemy Object at the center of the fan-shaped area he could move in, he could constantly adjust his path and maintain that position no matter which way the enemy tried to flee.

He took the shortest and quickest path.

He charged straight down the center.

There was no room for mind games for this true second generation Object that was specialized solely for killing its enemy. By bringing a strategic concept to its extreme, its style ironically resembled the ballistic missiles that Objects had driven to extinction. But with this Object, there was no way to intercept it. Its thick shield would deflect anything thrown at it. Once its target's data was entered into the system and the situation began to move, it would continue in a straight line even if dozens or hundreds of shots were fired at it. It would approach close enough for assured destruction and fire its main cannon just once.

Damage to the Object was assumed.

It was not expected to return unscathed.

The Simple Is Best was a perfect strategy used when an enemy was deemed worth the massive repair costs of the front armor.

Once it had been sent out, the battle was essentially over.

Once it fired, it was truly over.

Strategies were only effective until it appeared on the battlefield . Once it did, the enemy Object would surely be destroyed.

The Legitimacy Kingdom called it the Simple Is Best.

The Faith Organization called it the Grim Reaper.

The codenames the opposing world powers had given it showed just how much fear they felt toward it.

"…"

The pilot Elite was not concerned with the enemy Object. No matter how much it fired on him, the combination of thick front armor and supersonic speeds ensured he could kill them before they killed him.

In fact, the bigger problem was the massive inertial Gs produced by the 50+ meter and 200 thousand ton mass travelling at 1200 kph. It was much more than the fighters of an older age. He would feel the desire to vomit, but the contents of his stomach were unable to reach his mouth. If it were not for his special suit and the thorough "modifications" to his physical body, he could never have withstood it.

Piloting this Object wore down one's lifespan.

That was true for the Gs themselves and for the nasty collection of skills needed to withstand the Gs.

If he lost consciousness, it would all be for naught. Maintaining his own potential under the extreme conditions was the hardest part. To him, the battle was a solitary one, much like golf.

And what was it that concerned a golfer the most?

Was it the scores of his rivals on the same hole?

Was it the unrestrained voices of rude members of the audience ?

No.

They most feared sudden changes to the weather such as gusts of wind or rain.

"…!!"

Suddenly, a sort of explosion occurred near the target Object.

This was not a stray shot from the two battling Objects. The explosion launched a huge cloud of sand into the air. It seemed to flow up into the night sky like an upside-down waterfall of sand. The blast had clearly been directed so it would launch all that sand into the air.

And that cloud of sand shook.

The night wind began to carry it toward the Simple Is Best like a curtain.

The Elite could tell something strange was happening, but it was too late to stop. Coming to a sudden stop was an absurd idea. The inertial Gs from the sudden change could cause the Elite to burst like a water balloon inside the cockpit.

He continued the charge.

He had detected a danger ahead, but he would overcome it with his Object's superior specs.

Part 8

"It's a water jet," muttered Quenser.

What he had done was simple. He had buried his Hand Axe plastic explosive in the fine desert sand and detonated it. To direct the entire blast upwards, he had laid a bulletproof jacket below the bomb.

"Once I thought about it, it didn't make sense. Additional front armor? A beak? It supposedly detects incoming attacks and uses explosives to purge the surface layer of metal leaf to keep the damage from transferring, but it's still moving at overwhelming speeds that break the sound barrier. The air resistance has to be huge. That would produce enough energy to heat up the Object's surface. …That beak will be constantly taking tons of damage even without an Object attacking it! I just have to give it the final push!! "

"And that's why you blasted a bunch of sand into the air and into the wind? To increase the force of a water jet that cuts metal

sheets with high pressure water, they mix artificial diamond dust into the water to increase its resistance and friction. Are you saying you filled the air with sand to increase the aerodynamic damage to the Simple Is Best as it charges through at supersonic speeds!?"

It was the same as a file or grinder.

Rubbing at metal with a smooth rubber belt would not wear it down much, but using an adhesive to spray an even amount of metal powder on the surface would allow it to grind through a metal panel in a matter of seconds.

The Simple Is Best wore down its own body with its overwhelming speed. It was similar to driving a convertible along a highway that had tons of fish hooks hanging down.

"Most likely, heat and impacts below a certain level are within the margin of error and do not activate the beak. But what if it detects damage that exceeds that margin? I don't know how many hundreds or thousands of sheets of metal leaf that beak is made from, but the false readings should lead it to purge all of the beak that forms the silhouette needed for its aerodynamic control!!"

"I think it's a great idea, Quenser, but that isn't enough. You're underestimating the enemy's strength!! Just scattering some desert sand into the air won't destroy the strongest armor on an Object. It 'll have been regulated to handle clouds of sand caused by sandstorms and Object bombardments!!"

"You would be right if this was normal sand." Quenser smiled. "Have you forgotten about the Hornet Storm? It has no main

canon and instead attacks other Objects by focusing its secondary weapons on a single point. And all of those weapons are laser beams! Thanks to the stray shots targeting Lisa Deauville, the sand on the surface was quickly roasted by a massive amount of heat and then immediately cooled by the single digit temperatures of the desert night. It's hardly the perfect forging of a katana, but it greatly changed the quality of the iron sand and the size of the grains is much larger due to being wrapped in glassed silicon. Also…"

"Don't tell me the tungsten mixed into the ground was incorporated in!"

"I doubt it would conveniently harden just right, but it's better than nothing. And if the cloud of dust produces more friction than the Simple Is Best expects, the situation will completely change!!"

With a great rumbling, one corner of the desert night glowed red.

It was the Simple Is Best. Its surface had been heated until it glowed. It was reminiscent of an asteroid entering the atmosphere. The color proved it was undergoing a massive amount of friction that was thinly tearing into the entire spherical main body.

But it did not stop there.

The Simple Is Best's silhouette began to crumble. Its "beak" looked like a thick book that had its binding removed. The metal leaf on the surface was being purged with explosives. The unexpected amount of friction was being misinterpreted as an attack from an Object.

And the destruction did not stop at the first layer.

More and more layers scattered away.

Hundreds and even thousands of layers of the solid armor came undone in an instant. They were all blown away.

The streamlined "beak" silhouette disappeared and the Object lost its lifeline that had been entrusted to that beak because it was the sturdiest part.

That armor had been its greatest safety feature by using the air to keep it pressed against the ground instead of floating up.

What happened next was anything but an ordinary sight.

The 200 thousand ton mass lost control and floated up in the desert night.

Quenser snapped his fingers.

"Got it!! Without its beak, the Simple Is Best can't charge in at supersonic speeds. If it can't fire its low-stability plasma cannon at point-blank range, there's nothing to be afraid of. The princess just has to keep her distance and fire on it!!"

"You idiot!! Is this any time to be getting carried away!?"

He heard a rustling sound from somewhere.

In a moonlit part of the desert, he saw Heivia rise up a bit from where he was hiding.

And the boy shouted over his radio.

"The Simple Is Best has lost control and is rolling like a bowling ball! The Elite inside probably burst like a water balloon, but the threat isn't over yet. The scale might be too big to understand, but a 50 meter steel ball is rolling this way at several hundred kph! If you don't want to be turned to mincemeat as a stupid-looking bowling pin, pick up that blonde beauty and run!!"

"…!?"

Part 9

"The Simple Is Best has been heavily damaged by a main cannon blast from the Baby Magnum. The Hornet Storm continued fighting but began to withdraw the instant it was damaged. It likely viewed the loss of the two-against-one advantage as the time leave. The Baby Magnum was only lightly damaged."

A female operator spoke within the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's mission control room. Froleytia removed her narrow kiseru from her mouth and let out a sigh accompanied by sweet-smelling smoke.

"Understood. It's over then. Lower the threat level by one. Maintain the early warning shift and begin retrieving soldiers and handling the post-battle procedures."

"You have a congratulatory call from a brigadier general stationed in Sydney. He seems surprised we managed to escape the two-against-one situation with so little damage."

"Tell him to call back later."

"If I may speak openly, putting off calls like this can create unnecessary friction between the conflicting factions of the military."

"And if I may speak off the record, this brigadier general is probably one of the ones behind the 'natural assassination' we were told about. We have no reason to play along as he sweats bullets and tries to form a peaceful relationship with us. This is a job for the Black Uniforms stationed in the maintenance base."

With that said, Froleytia held her folded laptop under one arm and left the mission control room. She left the building and walked across the maintenance base that was made up of over one hundred large vehicles. The countless headlights filled the area with more light than a ballpark during a night game. It was easy to forget that they were in the middle of the desert at night.

On the way, she happened across a large troop transport helicopter being towed into a hangar. She waved at the soldiers finishing up their job as she continued on.

On one end of the maintenance base zone, she entered a facility that was too large to simply be called a medical room. Ever since the incident with the Water Strider in the Alaska region, she had made sure to expand the medics, military doctors, and medical facilities she entrusted her 1000-man battalion to. The biggest problem had been using various petty arguments to obtain the budget from the higher ups who did not view such things as important.

She spoke to one of the medics.

"Has she regained consciousness?"

"Enough to speak with her. Her right arm is a lost cause. It would be difficult to reconnect the nerves. But arm control technology using the electrical potential difference on the surface of the skin is being developed for ALS patients, so she should not have any difficulties in her daily life if she splurges and purchases a convenient prosthetic arm."

"The country should pay for at least that much. …Or perhaps we can strip it from the personal funds of those behind this."

The medic shrugged and moved out of the way, so Froleytia continued on and knocked lightly on a door. After receiving a response, she entered.

There were a few different beds inside, but only one was occupied.

"Lisa Deauville. Unfortunately, your name was not found in the military database. It is likely being hidden. It is unusual to find data I cannot access at my rank."

"That means you were not my 'customer', major. My name can only be accessed by the high-ranking officers who wish to protect themselves by using me as a trump card in a withdrawal. I am glad you are an honest soldier."

"Do you know any brigadier generals who have worked with you?"

"About three, but only one who is stationed in Oceania. The others are soldiers who never leave the safe countries."

"I can see why they would send out Objects to assassinate you," muttered Froleytia.

She had essentially worked as a bodyguard for VIPs, so she had likely had plenty of chances to learn their secrets. But if she was left in the care of the Black Uniforms who were kept highly isolated from the rest of the military, those black-hearted officers could not easily reach her.

Froleytia sat in the chair by the bed and opened her laptop on her lap.

"I have a lot to ask."

"I intend to reveal everything at my court martial. Whatever my reasons were, I must take responsibility for shooting my colleagues and commander."

"I need preliminary data for that. To be honest, I came here instead of immediately joining the craziness of the party celebrating our safety like I wanted to. If you understand, then hurry up and cooperate, second lieutenant."

"…Thanks."

"You can start by telling me what happened with the Stalk Killer Unit you belong to. Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage's explanation was not enough. It seems he is the type with good ideas but poor ability at conveying his thoughts. That may be the sad state of everyone in the sciences."

"I see. Now, where should I start?"

Lisa Deauville closed her eyes as she lay on the bed.

She organized her thoughts and then opened her eyes once more.

She knew what she should say first.

She looked directly at Froleytia Capistrano and spoke.

"My mission was to bring a large amount of paint into Oceania."

Chapter 3: Police are a Means of Stopping War >> Liberation Battle in Oceania

Part 1

"The military scandal shows no sign of ending. The council has made the rare decision to treat the plan to use an Object for a military assassination as attempted murder. The brigadier general thought to be the primary individual behind the plan has been called back from Oceania for…"

The princess sat on a metal staircase of a building near the Object maintenance area. She may have been bored because she was staring blankly at a 1seg TV program on her handheld device. The maintenance base zone was made up of over one hundred large vehicles and their tires measured over two meters in diameter. Stairs were needed simply to enter them.

In the dry desert, merely stepping into the shade felt much cooler. The princess had the front of her special suit open so the wind could reach her skin. As someone who spent long periods of time in an air-conditioned cockpit, her upper limit for heat appeared to be rather low.

A short distance away, the two idiots were using shovels to dig everywhere they could in the hot sand.

"Quenser, you idiot! You don't remember where you buried them, do you!?"

"I marked it last night! I secretly stuck a stick into the ground."

"When Myonri dug there, she found a ton of dead cicadas and almost passed out! Damn… What is going on? Where did we dig the hole we put the canned foods and packaged foods leftover from the victory party!? I thought we were going to be freed from those eraser-like rations for a while!!"

"Hurry, hurry! This maintenance base is mobile, remember? If the entire unit decides to move, we'll lose all those cans! There was beef stew in there. If we lose that, it'll traumatize me!!"

"What are those two doing?"

An old woman stuck her head out of the Object maintenance area and spoke to the princess.

The princess looked up from the screen and toward the old woman.

"It looks like a treasure hunt."

"You aren't going to join them?"

"I'm not in the mood for food. And I just finished building a cicada grave."

"???"

The old maintenance woman did not quite understand, so she decided to ask them directly.

"Hey, slacking student."

"Eeee!! One of the lecturers has locked onto us!"

"As long as she doesn't tell that huge-breasted commander, we're fine! Seduce her or something to bring her onto our side!! I'll go dig over there!!"

"No fair! Don't run off on your own!!"

"What are you doing out here?"

The old woman's words seemed to nail Quenser to the ground.

She was asking what he was doing "out here" because he was not in the Object maintenance area.

He slowly and stiffly turned toward her.

"W-would two cans of lunchmeat be enough for us to come to an understanding? Or maybe peaches or pineapple!?"

"I'm not asking about that. Have you forgotten why you came out to the battlefield in the first place? I thought it was to spend as much time observing the Object as possible so you could learn as much as possible."

"Are you seriously saying that?" Quenser sounded surprised as he continued digging around randomly. "They're repainting the Object in there. They're using tons of organic solvent in a closed space and I didn't dodge bullets to end up high on paint thinner."

"It is true painting an Object does not use any specialized technology. I admit that."

"It's the same as a normal warship. The Object's onion armor is made from special metal plates that have high-heat resistant and reactive elements mixed in like a katana, but that also means the armor will rust when exposed to the elements. We can't have the pride of our nation rusting, so they're careful to use techniques of keeping it from rusting, right? They're not mixing in ferrite to give it high-level stealth ability and they're not using camouflage patterns based on psychology and research into human cognizance to hide it from the human brain. There's nothing in it for a student like me."

Those sorts of techniques had been used for the fighters and tanks of the previous age.

This had been due to the high risk of being shot down or destroyed. But that effort was unnecessary with the colossal Objects which could withstand a direct hit from a nuclear weapon.

Also, it would be exceedingly difficult to hide a 50+ meter armored weapon from radar or the naked eye.

"The technical issues are a factor, but the paint job has more to do with the desires of the higher ups in the military and government."

"They don't want their hero sneaking around?"

"When sending an obviously overpowered weapon into battle, they need a tricky argument to silence the pacifists. That's why they like the symbolism of a hero that defeats an abominable enemy in a fair fight. The Objects have brought an end to the nuclear age by force, so they want to maintain the freshness of that impression for as long as possible. Letting it fade into history would be a waste."

"I suppose they need a simple commercial to gain the massive military budget they need for them. That's why they want the Objects to always be polished up bright like an exhibit at a motor show. They even have a lovely pilot Elite by its side to play the role of the companion girl. …But none of that is a job for the designer I want to be. Get a PR guy for that."

Quenser shrugged.

"Let me touch the more…well…sensitive parts at the core. Like the JPlevelMHD reactor or the targeting sensor control system."

"Don't be silly. You aren't touching those. Before you even think about it, you need to pass at least fifteen international exams."

As the princess sat on the metal staircase and stared blankly up into the blue sky, she called out to Quenser.

"Qu-Quenser?"

"??? What is it?"

"Did something happen with that Information Alliance Elite? She said something I didn't like about what she was going to do with you."

"Um, that can apply to a lot of Elites. Which one are we talking about?"

"…There are a lot of them?"

The princess's expression made it clear he had stirred up unnecessary trouble.

Quenser, however, did not understand what she had been trying to ask.

"Anyway, princess, I hope you haven't forgotten about the karaoke!! During the battle with the Simple Is Best and the Hornet Storm, you had the nerve to say idols were worthless because anyone can sing!!"

"Uuh… I-I remember."

"Good. These days, you can run a karaoke place anywhere using internet download services. There are even some here in Oceania. During our next day off, I demand to see if you have the skills to back up your bragging!!"

The old maintenance woman let out a quiet sigh.

This arrangement was actually almost exactly what the princess had expected to happen and wanted to happen, but she did not seem to know what to do now that things were going more smoothly than expected.

It was an example of a plan coming back to bite her.

The two youths compared their schedules to set up a date and Quenser suddenly spoke up once they had finished.

In that instant, he became a true idiotic designer.

"Oh, right. I need to ask you too, princess. The reactor may be too dangerous, but can I check out the targeting sensor control system or somewhere else that will help me study Object design?"

"……"

"Do you not trust me at all?"

"It's not an issue of your skill," said the old woman in exasperation. "There are different types of people who work with Object design. There are those who build up virtual models based on theory, there are academic types that materialize and realize those models, there are inventor types who have a single idea and go beyond their primary field to gather everything they need to realize it, and there are craftsmen who use their experience and unexplainable instincts in their fingertips to produce results

greater than precision manufacturing equipment. The targeting sensor control system you're talking about is a black box that complexly combines all of those together. Not even the princess or I will touch it without reason."

"So you entrust your life to something no one touches?"

"That is not what she meant," said the princess. "It is maintained in sessions including more than fifty people. You can think of it like exchanging our opinions to find the right flavor for a cocktail we do not know the recipe to. Bringing in someone who doesn't know the flavor would distort our opinions and raise the likelihood of the final drink not matching the perfect flavor."

"An Object has over one hundred cannons, both big and small," continued the old woman. "Each of those has multiple sensors and the entire Object has its primary radars and sensors. Coordinating all of those is beyond human ability. Most of it is handled by computers, but there are some situations where that doesn't cut it. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Laser weapons?"

"That's right. Those move at the speed of light, so they can't be avoided after seeing them fired. What matters is predicting the attack by observing the minute movements of the enemy's cannons and sensor lenses. You can't leave that to a computer both when attacking and when defending."

In a battle between Objects, one could not simply continue to evade. One had to attack and hit.

If an enemy would predict the attack before it was fired, one had to predict where they would evade to and fire there instead.

"Ultimately, the whole system only works when you combine the precise sensors, the high-spec computers, and the fearful fingertips of a human. It seems the Information Alliance is researching completely automated targeting algorithms, but they have a long way to go towards making it practical. Then again, they're more skilled than anyone when it comes to using information, so who knows how much we can trust what our intelligence division has gathered on them."

"I won't lose to something like that."

This seemed to have worked up an odd sense of competition in the princess because she pouted her lips and took a sip from her drink's straw.

Quenser then heard an electronic tone from the small radio in his uniform.

When he pulled it out and brought it to his mouth, Froleytia's voice spoke to him.

"Study time is over for the moment, Quenser. Head over to the briefing room with the others. A pre-mission briefing is about to begin."

"What do we have to do now?"

"That's what I will explain to you. But it's a simple mission. I'm not asking you to make a charge at a cutting-edge Object or anything."

"I beg you to never ask me to do that!! I haven't been doing it because I want to!!"

"Toward the end of the incident with the Simple Is Best and the Hornet Storm, a large underground structure was discovered when the ground collapsed. That was from your report, Quenser."

"W-well, yes."

"Today, you will be investigating the abandoned facility. This is simple post-battle cleanup. I suppose the police would call it a crime scene inspection. I honestly doubt it has anything to do with the war, but we have to control everything in the vicinity of the battle. I will be the one writing the annoying report to the higher ups, so you all can help me out a little."

"So no other military is involved this time? There aren't going to be any firefights?"

"That's right. Unless you've heard reports of the Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance living in holes."

"Wait. Wait just a minute. Are you saying you want us to carefully check over this place, but nothing – nothing at all – is

going to happen? We just have to drive across the desert as if having a picnic, snap a few photos of these strange ruins, and that's it? You promise?"

"And surprisingly, you actually get paid. With the people's tax money, no less."

"Woo hoo!! Oh, god! I can't wait!! Please fill my team with a ton of female soldiers! This is perfect for Operation North Wind and the Sun. Partway through, our tension is sure to drop and then they'll strip down to their thin inner clothing!! Hooray! Hooray!!"

"Yes, yes. I get it. You will be in your usual filthy guy team with Heivia. Have fun in your sweaty world of little clothing."

"Hah hah hah. If you really do that, I'm starting a coup."

"Hah hah hah!! Do you really think I'm the type to joke about this?"

The transmission ended with a click.

Since Froleytia said it, there was no doubt that he would end up surrounded by men. However, Quenser was not about to give up. He still had hope.

"On a boring investigation, the investigation team, guard team, and transport team will all move as one big group. Even if my team looks like a boys' school, there's still a chance of cute young girls in the other teams!! I haven't lost yet!!"

"Sigh. Are you sure it will turn out that well?" asked the old woman.

"I am!! After all, the end of February is getting towards the end of the fiscal year!! The top levels of the military need to use up their extra budget or the defense budget will be lowered next year. Sending out tons of unnecessary soldiers for a boring mission could easily happen now!!"

"Why are you only this good at calculations at times like this?"

That was of course because this topic was the most compatible with the pink brain cells of adolescence.

At any rate, Quenser raised his hands in an expression of joy.

"Fwa ha ha ha ha ha!! I won't let our commander win this time! The amount of girls in skimpy, wet, and see-through clothes would surprise a soft drink commercial! Paradise awaits me!!"

Part 2

"…Ah!?"

Quenser suddenly opened his eyes.

His recent memories were fuzzy. He could not see anything properly. The blue sky of the desert spreaded out before his eyes. He seemed to be lying on his back, but he could not feel the burning of the hot sand.

He felt an unpleasant cold sweat as if he had anemia.

He detected a burning smell mixed with a rusty metallic smell.

…A rusty metallic smell?

"Gah!? Gfh! D-dammit. I just remembered. Our helicopter crashed. Then what was that dream I just had…? Don't tell me my life was flashing before my eyes! Cough cough!!"

The surface of the desert was not flat. It had large undulations similar to a stormy sea and some areas had height differences of several meters. He was lying in a position to use one of those sand dunes as a shield.

But what was he being shielded from?

The answer was obviously the attacks being fired their way.

Seemingly never-ending sounds of bursting gunfire made him think of a fireworks show gone wrong. Quenser's group was not on the attack. They were unilaterally being fired upon. The storm

of steel was so great they would have been torn to pieces in just a few seconds if not for the dune.

Heivia had his back pressed against the dune while sticking just his rifle's sensors up over it.

"Are you finally awake, you bastard!? I was beginning to think I wasted an adrenaline cartridge!!"

"Seriously? You mean one of those thick needles you stab directly into the heart!? I was in that bad a state!?"

"I thought this would be best. If you were hitting on an angel, I apologize."

"Oh, right! I saw my life flash before my eyes! It seemed so real! ! Um…huh? I couldn't quite remember what happened. I remembered seeing the princess, Froleytia, and the old maintenance woman."

"Right, right. I already knew how little fidelity you had, but it's good to know you're the same as ever!"

As his blood flow returned to normal, the data in Quenser's head gradually fell into the proper order.

(Oh, that's right.)

He had been sent on a mission by Froleytia.

They were to investigate the underground structure he had come across during the battle with the Simple Is Best and Hornet

Storm. Even if it was not a very important building, she had needed detailed information on anything in the combat zone for a report to the higher ups.

Quenser and the others had been loaded into the large transport helicopters and were sent to the area of desert in question.

Nothing but cream-colored sand had continued in every direction, so it had been a frightening sight to look down on. He had wanted to avoid getting lost here. Even a South American jungle would have more opportunities for survival techniques.

The only landmarks were the remains of the rusty pipelines that travelled here and there like blood vessels of the planet. But if one was stranded, it would probably be impossible to tell a rescue team where one was using them. After all, they would continue in a straight line for 100 or even 1000 kilometers.

"It doesn't matter how intently you stare down there, you aren't going to find an oasis or a girl in a micro bikini," Heivia said. " More importantly, can you believe we're travelling over a battlefield in a helicopter? Sure, we aren't directly dealing with an Object, but one of them may suddenly decide to go on a hunt."

But if they had been crammed into military trucks to travel along the rough desert under the hot sun, they would have been struck by the double-punch of heat stroke and motion sickness before even arriving at the site.

After the formation of large helicopters had travelled for a while , they had spotted the remains of the terminal facility where

several old pipelines gathered. That facility had been used to gather water from deep underground rather than oil.

But then they had soon spotted a few trucks with canopies parked near the old facility.

Quenser had frowned.

"Are those scavengers trying to gather anything of value?"

"There can't be any proper machinery left. And look at the canopies. That's the Blue Cross. They're the world's largest medical humanitarian organization. They head to Antarctic and the jungle to find samples of deadly bacteria, they give money to groups researching nanotech medicine, and all sorts of other things . They're probably providing food."

"Nanotech? Oh, you mean the techniques taken from military science where it can be used as a new method for regulating Elite's bodies? They place drops of medicine in a membrane like a small bubble, get that bubble past the filters to the brain or kidneys, and provide the medicine directly to the target. They use ultrasonic waves to break the outer shell at the desired point, right?"

"You get excited about anything that has even the slightest connection to Objects, don't you? Can you stop breathing so heavily? It's creepy."

"Anyway, what's the Blue Cross doing at these abandoned ruins?"

At that point, Quenser's memories suddenly lost coherency.

As he laid on his back with a hand on his sweaty brow, he let out a groan.

"That's right. Those bastards weren't the Blue Cross at all. Someone painted up their trucks to trick us. They removed the canopies and there were missiles inside."

"Are you the type that needs coffee and toast to wake up in the morning? If not, get moving!! We're gonna be surrounded!!"

The burnt smell was coming from the remains of their crashed helicopter.

The whirl of bullets was not coming from just one direction. They were partially surrounded by a C-shape.

It was unclear who the enemy was or how many of them there were.

Their group had to be at least two or three sizes larger than Quenser and Heivia's group. More than twenty people were lying behind the sand dune like Quenser. They all had their arms or legs bound with bandages to stop their bleeding, some had the removed stock of a carbine used to set a broken bone, and a lot of them were unconscious. The area had become a makeshift field hospital.

Quenser looked up at the blue sky that seemed to continue forever.

"Where are the other helicopters? Where's our way out!? We'll just be worn down bit by bit like this. We can't fight in the desert without a means of mobility!"

"All of the functioning helicopters have temporarily withdrawn ! We can't exactly overcome their surface-to-air missiles with the power of friendship. If they hover around here to pick us up, they' ll be shot down! No help is coming until we silence those!!"

"They may be transport helicopters, but they have machineguns attached to the door, right? Firing down with those will make a huge difference!!"

"In this clean age, no one wants to start a Western-style quick draw using heavy weaponry. We won't get anywhere wishing for something that isn't coming. Focus on reality!!"

Nothing but sand as far as the eye could see lay in every direction.

There was no escape without some kind of vehicle. Even if they began to flee on foot, they would be quickly overtaken and riddled with holes. Falling back would not improve their situation and most of those injured in the crash were in no state to walk on their own.

The enemy was advancing.

Once the enemy surpassed the sand dune, they would only sink into a puddle of blood.

"Screw this. You've gotta be kidding me. I thought this was supposed to be an easy mission."

As Quenser complained, he rolled over onto his stomach. He then climbed up the dune and stopped next to Heivia.

"How many are there?"

"Somewhere between 50 and 60. Only a samurai or ninja can defeat that many in a straight fight. It will be a different story if we have support from the helicopters, but we need to silence those armored vehicles to do that."

"Who are they anyway?"

"I don't know. But knowing that they're bastards who don't deserve to live is good enough for me," spat out Heivia. "But their equipment is relatively new. It looks like they gathered downgraded weapons that the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance sell to gather foreign currency. Their ability may be intentionally lowered, but they're expensive. I doubt a gang or slum residents who are strapped for cash can get their hands on that stuff."

The repeated sounds of gunfire caused Quenser to grimace.

"Are you saying those are trained soldiers? They're firing around almost at random. If they were aiming each shot, we would have already been filled with bullets."

"Listen, skinny boy. Have you never heard of sounding out your enemy? When you don't know where they are, you fire all over the place and wait for them to react. …It's all over once they find out where exactly we are. They have tons of machineguns and missiles on their trucks. Specifically, they have more than ten trucks. This shield of sand is meaningless. They may be surface-to-air, but a few of those missiles will blow the terrain to smithereens."

Quenser let out a long, slow breath.

And then he asked another question.

"Then what exactly are we supposed to do?"

"Well done getting your mind in gear."

Heivia pulled back the rifle sensors he had been peering over the dune and used the sand to write out the information he had risked his life to collect.

"They have their machinegun and surface-to-air missile equipped trucks set up to protect the terminal facility that pumps water up from underground. They're between five and six hundred meters away. Their rifles and machineguns can reach us from there, but fifty or sixty soldiers armed with carbines and light machineguns are slowly approaching. Once they cross a certain line, we'll be slaughtered. We need to do something before they can manage that."

"We can't win if we fight? Are there too many of them?"

"As I said, we could annihilate their infantry with our helicopter machineguns, but those helicopters can't approach right now. We need to silence those surface-to-air missile containers sitting up on their trucks."

"But…"

Quenser glanced over at Heivia.

He carried a shoulder-fired missile launcher over his back. That could be used to blow up the armored trucks, but there was one major problem.

"That's right. I only have one shot and there are over ten of them. This isn't going to work."

"…"

Quenser remained silent for a moment.

He stared at the rough map his friend had drawn on the sand.

"Heivia, my memories aren't perfect due to the shock, so I need to ask you something."

"I'm not your fiancé from before your memory loss if that's what you're wondering."

"It's about when they attacked our helicopter with their missiles . I knew I could't expect a large transport helicopter to evade, but

we weren't shot down without putting up any kind of fight, right?"

"What? Well, I remembered a siren blaring as it scattered chaff and flares to trick their radar. I thought we might have activated an infrared jammer as well, but you could see how well all that worked. We were shot down and the other helicopters were forced to withdraw."

"In other words, we had countermeasures, but they were completely ineffective," said Quenser while emphasizing each word. "They had some large radar equipment supporting their targeting. That's how they saw through our deceptions and shot us down. But what if all of their anti-air weaponry were reliant on it? We could take out their 'net in the sky' by destroying just the one piece of equipment. Guns and missiles are essentially the same. Without a means of aiming them, they won't cause any damage."

"It does make sense," groaned Heivia. "All of the trucks have oddly large antennae attached. It's definitely possible they're using accurate data from a command vehicle that specializes in gathering intelligence. But…"

"But?"

"Where is it?" Heivia stabbed his rifle's stock into the center of his map on the sand. "You heard me, right? There are more than ten of their armored trucks and we only have one missile. If we don't hit the command vehicle on the first shot, it's all over. Once we lose our trump card, we have nothing left!! Is there any way to tell which one it is!?"

"That's a good question."

Quenser folded his arms lightly and traced his index finger over his mouth.

He looked like he was contemplating the dinner menu.

"Heivia, how many assault rifle and handgun bullets do you have left?"

"What?"

"If it isn't enough, gather some more from those too injured to move. They won't do them any good anyway."

"Wait, wait! They may have been disguised as the Blue Cross, but their trucks probably still have handmade plate inside. You can't fight armored trucks with normal bullets!!"

"I'm not trying to destroy the trucks. I have no interest in the bullets themselves."

"???"

Quenser ignored Heivia's confused look and gathered a few assault rifles and carbines.

He disassembled them without any tools and removed the barrel which resembled a long, narrow pipe.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Make some giant fireworks."

Quenser bent and crushed one end of the long, narrow tubes, removed the rifle bullets from the magazines, and scattered them across the sand.

"A long time ago, they would actually use this kind of simple rocket weapon in Asia. They were meant to set fire to castles or ships. …You said the distance is five or six hundred meters? Cramming in this much intelligent military powder should reach even with the plastic explosive and fuse attached to the front."

"Are you saying we can oppose all those armored trucks if we go to this extra trouble?" Heivia looked displeased. "Have you forgotten what matters most with weapons, Quenser? Targeting. Reaching them and hitting them are two very different things! A simple fireworks rocket made by stuffing powder into a tube and attaching it to a stick for stability isn't going to hit!!"

"It doesn't have to hit." Quenser readily overturned Heivia's assumption. "They think they're perfectly safe over there, so if bombs start bursting too far away to have been thrown, they'll definitely panic. They'll try to evacuate the most important thing first. I don't know how stupid they are, but they are smart enough to know they can't afford to have their radar vehicle destroyed. While they're busy secretly moving their most important card away, you just have to blow it up with your missile."

Heivia was dumbfounded, but Quenser continued his cunning explanation.

"You mentioned sounding out your enemy, remember? Let's show them how it's really done."

Part 3

As planned, the makeshift rockets were fired into the Oceanian sky.

Heivia fired his shoulder-fired missile into the command truck with the large-scale radar antenna attached and the Legitimacy Kingdom's unilateral counterattack began.

Once the threat of anti-air weapons was removed, the large transport helicopters were able to return.

They had large caliber machineguns bolted directly to the floor near the door.

As the sound of those firing exploded overhead, Quenser covered his mouth with one hand.

"Why do people like to root for the underdog? Where did my hatred for them go?"

"I think you're actually looking down on them with a sense of superiority. But don't worry. You're enjoying your life well enough."

Quenser and Heivia laid face down on the slope of the sand dune while the sounds of destruction continued.

The handmade armored trucks had been relatively well modified, but they were filled with holes, their gasoline tanks and weaponry ignited, and they violently exploded. The intense destruction of the machineguns rained down evenly on the group of infantry who had tried to corner Quenser and the others. There were no screams. Instead, a dark red sauce was splattered across the giant frying pan of the desert.

Quenser entered a philosophic mood.

"What is peace?"

Heivia picked his nose with his little finger.

"It's when we're still alive."

After about ten minutes, the sounds of gunfire completely stopped.

A few of the transport helicopters remained at the ready in the air while a few others slowly descended to collect the injured.

One soldier who stepped out of a helicopter shouted over the noise of the rotors.

"Thanks for your work!! We have permission to bring back all of your injured. Leave them with us and they can recover in a bed that reeks of disinfectant!!"

"Yeah, yeah. We get it! But take a look behind you before you say that. The helicopters aren't at all ready to leave. We can't leave until the investigation is done!!"

Quenser and Heivia watched as the investigation team and their guards started for the pump facility that connected to the giant underground structure.

The ceiling of the underground structure had collapsed during the previous battle, so it was open to the surface. However, no one would rappel down a ten meter cliff when a perfectly safe staircase was available.

Quenser used his uniform's sleeve to wipe sweat from his brow and looked up at the roasting sun that felt like the end of the world .

"What do we do now? I don't want to sit around here. We would dry up before they finished."

"There's a pipeline over there. It's rusted and falling apart, but we can rest behind it. The humidity should be lower and it'll block the sun."

The pipeline was a tube with a diameter of over two meters, so it produced enough of a shadow to sit in. The two boys walked over and found most of the other soldiers already leaning up against the rusted metal pipe like a line of ants.

"This is awful."

"Are you sure it's cooler here? I feel like gathering together would concentrate the heat."

Quenser pulled out the water bottle attached to his uniform and took a gulp. It had been warmed by the sun and his body temperature, so he spat it back out.

"Yuck! It feels like I'm drinking my own sweat!!"

"Use your head, student. You need to cool the water bottle with the icing spray used for machineguns. Medic!!"

Heivia's joking shout let Quenser know the danger had truly passed.

"So what was that? This pump facility is in ruins and all the usable equipment was removed. Missiles cost 10,000 euros each. Why would they defend this place with their lives?"

"Look over here, Quenser."

Heivia peered inside a broken portion of the pipeline. The pipe was over two meters wide, so it looked more like a metal tunnel.

In fact, it was one.

"There's sand gathered at the bottom and there's a thick line down the middle. It looks like a tire track. From the width, I'd say a motorcycle."

"A tire track?"

With a confused look, Quenser peered inside the broken pipe.

And then it hit him.

"This abandoned pipeline network stretches across the entire desert. No water or oil is being sent through it, so it's a safe empty space. You don't mean…"

"When the military government ruled Oceania, secret funds, weapons, and drugs travelled across the country like ghosts were transporting them. They slipped right past the military checkpoints and satellite surveillance. It was said they did it by bribing or threatening the local soldiers, but this might be it."

"A secret tunnel? So as easily as heading underground through a manhole, they could freely move across Oceania without being checked?"

It was not the pump facility or the giant underground structure that mattered.

Someone was trying to hide the large-scale smuggling network that used the pipelines.

"People armed with the latest military equipment were fighting to protect a smuggling network? That smells fishy to me. Is it an intelligence agency raising funds by selling drugs or something?"

"But who exactly were they?" Heivia looked annoyed as he glanced over at the corpses which had been almost completely destroyed. "Their equipment looks like a collection of Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance stuff. And it's the downgraded versions sold for foreign currency rather than the

official military equipment. They announce they're lowering the quality, but still keep the price high. I doubt a local gang or mafia would want to use them."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. Were they soldiers or were they people hired to help out? Well, either way they would mix in a few pros to take command."

Suddenly, an infantryman guarding the exterior of the pump facility spoke to Quenser and Heivia.

"If you're discussing conspiracy theories, you might want to check this out."

"What?"

Heivia sounded puzzled as the man tossed him a small rectangular handheld device.

However, this was not the type issued to Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. It also had dark red stains in places.

The soldier shrugged.

"I was scavenging. Those thugs out front were splattered everywhere, so I gathered whatever I thought I could sell."

"Seriously? You really set foot in that poisonous swamp?"

"And in exchange, I found some interesting data. It looks less like official data and more like someone at the bottom gathered some data to figure out what he was involved in."

"…"

Quenser turned on the device and it was not even locked with a password.

Some of the data files were filled with numbers about ten digits long. He could not read hexadecimal off the top of his head, so he could not tell anything from just that.

"Wait a second," said Heivia as he peered in from the side. "The first four digits are all the same. I thought these looked familiar. They're bank account numbers, aren't they? I think these belong to a major Information Alliance one."

"Why does a Legitimacy Kingdom noble know that?"

"Don't be stupid. In this age of wars, you never know what levies will be imposed. Do you really think a greedy noble is going to keep all his money in a single account? We have tons of ways of spreading out our assets. My family has a group of specialist accountants working for us."

Quenser tilted his head as he scrolled through the iron-smelling device.

There appeared to be over one hundred bank account numbers.

"So what is this list of bank accounts?"

"Probably a deposit list. In other words, these connect to the names of the people cooperating with the people running things from the shadows. Look, the numbers at the end of the account numbers are the same too. That probably refers to a branch in a tropical island tax haven. They're probably using secret accounts to launder their money."

"The people running things from the shadows? We still don't know if this is really a conspiracy."

"If we dig up the names and identities of this week's MVPs here , we might find a connection. They disguised their trucks as the Blue Cross and loaded them with machineguns and missiles to hide the secret passageway through the pipeline. They're definitely up to no good."

The mischievous infantryman shrugged in utter exhaustion.

"These are secret accounts in the Information Alliance. They aren't going to give us the information if we ask."

"Quenser."

"Do I look that smart to you? Do you think you can just throw any problem my way?"

Quenser looked irritated, but he begrudgingly agreed after the soldiers around him tossed some icing spray his way.

He sprayed it across his water bottle and spoke.

"Knowing the account numbers is a start. How about we leak the entire list onto the internet while making it look like they were hacked? With secret tax haven accounts, trust matters most. If information has been taken straight from the servers, the clients and managers will both panic."

"Yes, but will that accomplish anything other than causing a commotion?"

"We can quickly open a fake website claiming to check whether your account number was stolen. If we add in some spyware to snatch the IP of anyone entering their number, we should be able to determine who entered what number. And the shadier the person, the sooner they'll respond."

In that instant, everyone resting in the shade of the pipeline stared silently at Quenser.

He squirmed under the pressure of the strange silence.

"Um, what is this? Is this any way to react after I give you what you want?"

"This settles it. Nothing good would come of letting him leave the military."

They contacted the maintenance base zone's intelligence division via radio, but they said it would take several days to create a proper fake website.

Heivia stuck out his tongue.

"Damn those desk workers. Do clocks move at a different speed over there? Are they using a vacation clock or something?"

"Either way, I'm jealous."

"They aren't on board with this. It's a pain, but you heard them. Everyone, give any idea we can use to steal the credit from the intelligence department since they refuse to play along."

Long story short, they ended up with the following ideas: " Different computer viruses are compressed and saved on a certain foreign server", "I know a collection of templates for scam sites", and "As long as you have the basic template for the site, you can use a cloud service to edit the details and create a false site in only a few minutes."

"Why do all of you know about this kind of thing?"

"As a future engineer, I think you should gladly welcome useful nerds. Otherwise, your organization will end up as a dinosaur fossil."

As they had announced, the bored helpers completed the false website in only a few minutes. Rather than building it from the ground up, they chose a template from a database containing thousands of templates for scam sites and added the necessary decorations. They did the same for the spyware.

"Where should we spread the address? Just on any major message board?"

"For the Legitimacy Kingdom, there's Blue Blood which only nobles with bloodlines continuing back for 300 years can enter. For the Information Alliance, there's Rank Literacy which can only be used by people who run sites with over half a million hits a day. There are sites for elitist people from the other two world powers as well."

"Those are all closed SNSs. We can probably manage with Blue Blood, but you aren't using my ID."

"I don't need to. Everyone uses different identities online. A refined noble will let off some steam by shouting insults on anonymous message boards like it's a masquerade party. If we spread the information there, the tainted information will make its way into the closed SNSs. They'll ruin their own attempts to seal it off."

"It sounds like the insecticide used for roaches. It's made to look like delicious food so they'll take it back to their nest where it kills all of them."

A male soldier had been curled up and fiddling with a handheld device, but he now made an OK sign with his hand.

The others peered curiously at the small screen.

"This virus site is a lot like creating a robot from an empty box and tape, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's already gotten a few pieces of personal information."

First, they had leaked the list online and let the emergency information spread. Once the clients grew uneasy, they were lured to the false site where they entered their account number. It was unclear when exactly the different waves of attack began.

"We have a few names and identities to go with numbers on our list. About ten so far. Let's try to find a link between them."

"Wait." Heivia pointed at one of the names. "This is an international satellite TV executive. He claims to bring laughter and the truth to the blank regions and dictatorships where information is being controlled. Oceania's mass media has begun to recover, but it's still unstable. Satellite TV still has a lot of credibility and influence here."

He pointed at another name.

"This is a blog king. He's known as Oceania's leading source of sarcasm."

He pointed at another.

"This is an entertainer famous for volunteer work."

And another.

"An executive for an international canned drink maker. They have ads during all sorts of shows."

As each name was described, Quenser saw a common theme.

"Are they using the media to influence people's impressions?"

"Their impressions of what?"

"No matter how much they're being paid, I doubt they would say something that strays too far from their ideologies and beliefs. The money is nothing but the trigger giving them the final push. In that case, what do these people believe in?"

Heivia grimaced when he heard that.

He had been the one describing the names, so he had a general understanding of the people.

"This might be a major headache for us."

"Why?"

"They want true independence for Oceania by having the 'thugs ' leave. They're a bunch of people who refuse to do any real work while pretending to be pacifists. They think they're the most important no matter what."

"Even the corporate executives?"

"Sitting arrogantly in a leather chair isn't normally referred to as 'work'."

A mysterious group in Oceania was spreading intentionally biased information to create a tendency toward hating the coalition military.

The current problem was the pipeline they were using to secretly transport something across the desert. They had even started a firefight with the Legitimacy Kingdom in order to hide it.

This was more than a newspaper editorial.

This mysterious group was prepared to use legitimate violence.

"This pipeline is being used as a secret transportation network and massive amounts of money are being given to influential people to manipulate the opinions of the Oceanian people. What are they trying to do here?"

"Hey," spoke up the soldiers who had helped them earlier. "I checked a few more of their handheld devices and there's a net storage site they access frequently. They may keep their larger data there."

"Does it have a password?"

"Just like online banks, it uses a one-time password. …But this was outsourced and the company in charge of security has slipped past the firewall a few times. We might be able to use the maintenance master key."

"Would they really use the same key for several weeks or months?"

"No, but if we find a pattern to the changes in the periodically updated alphanumeric key, it might be possible to determine what the current key is. It will take some time, though."

"Try working on it," said Quenser as his radio emitted an electronic tone.

Froleytia was calling them.

"I have a question for all of you. You aren't performing unauthorized electronic warfare against an Information Alliance tax haven bank, are you? The intelligence department has detected a fascinating flow of data."

(Shit!!)

Everyone there straightened their spines.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance were at war , but wars had rules known as treaties. And as Heivia had said, secret tax haven accounts were unofficially used by nobles and royals so they could secretly divide their assets up between false names and dummy corporations. Even if this was an enemy nation , some higher ups might not want them messing with it. Someone might be placing pressure on Froleytia.

But when no amount of apology would fix the situation, Quenser did not want to continue speaking for long.

He responded casually while looking around for help.

Heivia pointed toward the pump facility with his thumb.

"(That thick concrete might cut off the signal!!)"

"Okay, okay. Eh? What!? No, no. That isn't what we're doing!!"

While Quenser stalled for time, he and Heivia ran toward the remains of the pump facility.

They circled around the lake of dark red sauce and continued toward the building which contained stairs leading underground.

The armored trucks disguised as the Blue Cross were still burning and smoking. They would no longer function, but the two idiots circled well away from them because the bombs or missiles could suddenly burst.

The inside of the building was a large space.

It had originally been a facility to draw up unused water from underground and send it to grain-producing land, but all of the equipment had been removed when it was abandoned. It was now a movie theater-sized space made of reinforced concrete. It was essentially empty. Broken metal stairways and passageways could be found here and there and they appeared to be built around large machinery that was no longer present.

But that did not matter.

"(Heivia! The signal's still going strong!! Froleytia's completely pissed!! We can't escape like this!!)"

"(Let's head down the spiral staircase and underground!!)"

The two idiots descended the spiral staircase and ran out into a narrow tunnel. Static finally began to fill the radio signal.

This was the moment they had been waiting for.

"Ksshhh. Wait, what is… Explain yourse-…kssssshhhhh!!"

"Eh? What? I can't hear you! I can't hear you at all!! Over!!"

With that, he ended the transmission and switched off the radio altogether.

Heivia leaned up against the concrete wall.

"If we hang around here, the investigation team will see us and force odd jobs on us. Let's go pretend to be working."

They were doing nothing more than extending their suffering, but they took an extremely positive stance and viewed it as a chance to arrange the excuses they needed to weasel out of it.

They passed through a straight corridor and arrived at the underground structure.

However…

"Wow. There really isn't a ceiling. It feels like the world's biggest convertible."

The ground above had completely collapsed during the previous battle, so the blue sky was perfectly visible even in the " underground" structure. They were over ten meters down, so they were not about to climb up or down rather than using the stairs.

A lot of sand had poured in, so it looked a lot more cluttered than the pump facility.

The piles of wooden boxes may have added to that impression.

"It looks like they've finished investigating here. Otherwise, we never would have been allowed in."

"What are these boxes? Surely they aren't empty."

After receiving permission from a man on the investigation team who was taking photographs, Quenser and Heivia removed the nails from one wooden box and opened it.

"There's some kind of powder packed in plastic."

"But it doesn't look like something with a high street price."

The bags had some kind of label, so Quenser used his handheld device to snap a photo.

They opened a few more boxes and found reels of fiber optic cable as well as nuts and bolts packaged by size.

"Did someone's father make a secret base for his home improvement projects?"

"Wait. I think I know what that powder was," muttered Quenser.

Suddenly, the two idiots heard the noise of something falling over.

And when they turned toward the noise…

Part 4

In the name of war recovery, many different types of construction had begun at a fevered pitch across Oceania: houses, shops, roads, water and sewage, etc. The coalition of the four world powers claimed bringing order to the country was their top priority, but they could not utterly eliminate anyone who was even slightly suspicious. Specialists who did not look right in a suit or work uniform and guards who carried guns could not be distinguished from actual bad guys.

If those suspicious-looking people were let into the same space as rich foreign tourists, it could lead to a situation similar to a hamster that mistook another hamster's sex.

To keep some separation, a hidden side to the city was created for those suspicious-looking people. Drawn by the flow of money, violent restaurants, marriage scam artists who were always crying in a bar, and people from various other occupations would gather there. These were the people who had gone too far in their original country. Like a snowball rolling down a snowy mountain, the strength of these dark cities slowly but steadily grew.

A certain bar in one such place was quite cheap but it was best not to think about what corners were cut to make it that cheap. In a dimly lit corner of that bar, a small group sat around a table cut off from the rest of the bar by curtains.

"They have failed."

A young man wore a black suit and hat that looked out of place in the summertime desert. His sunglasses looked more like they were hiding his face than protecting his eyes from the sun.

"Terminal 52 has been taken by the Legitimacy Kingdom. The men we hired were wiped out."

"We knew they would lose from the beginning."

He was not the only one in such a conspicuous outfit.

A woman sitting at the same table wore all black, down to her necktie.

"Even if they could temporarily drive them back, they are a world power and thus they have an Object. If the problem grew too large, they would have sent it in. Those men were doomed to lose."

But it was not just the two of them. Everyone at the table was wearing all black.

"Their loss was planned for. We all understand that. In that case , could you tell us one thing? Did they die before or after achieving their goal?"

"If not, I would be a little more concerned."

"Whatever gets in the way, no one can reach us as long as all evidence is destroyed in the end."

Everyone turned toward the young man who had spoken first.

No, they were technically looking behind him.

A blonde woman stood there wearing the exact same suit and sunglasses. She also held the same type of handgun the rest of them possessed.

"Are you saying the objective was achieved?"

The young man slowly raised his hands in response.

The tip of the silencer was already pressed against the back of his head.

He smiled thinly and responded quietly.

"Yes. And let me add this: it was nice knowing-…"

A muffled gunshot interrupted his words.

He collapsed face-first onto the round table. The others slowly stood up and took the necessary measures. They gathered the empty shell casing from the ground, used a rag wet with alcohol to wipe down anything that might have their fingerprints or saliva on it, and cleaned up the floor with a roller of sticky tape to pick up any fallen hair.

They made sure it was the same as if nothing had happened.

"Case #022 complete. Supervisor Alaska 49's death has cut off the trail. Case #023 will now begin. The supervisor will be me, Texas 28."

The blonde woman spoke quietly while pulling a brand new tablet computer from her bag. The others all focused on her.

They did so exactly as they had focused on the young man who had just been killed.

It was as if it were a ritual that had begun long before that young man.

"Fortunately, Case #022's objective was fulfilled. A link with the scene has been secured. As planned, we shall continue to the next situation."

"In other words?"

"We shall bury it in an explosion."

They remained in the shadows.

Even when they won and when they were superior, they would kill their allies to suppress all information.

In that case, they were not going to hesitate to kill their enemies.

Part 5

"Not good," muttered Quenser.

He had seen what some kind of impact had knocked over within the underground structure.

"Not good!! Heivia, everyone else! Get out of here now!!"

"What's the matter, Quenser?"

A 1.5 meter cylindrical container similar to a propane tank lay before them. However, it was made of transparent reinforced glass and it was filled with some kind of liquid. The center of the cylinder had a donut-like hollow area which was filled with an explosive.

"That's an acid bomb. Militaries use it to destroy evidence!! When the explosive detonates, it destroys the container and the blast sends a thorough shower of powerful acid in every direction. In just a few seconds, it reacts with the air and a vaporized acid cloud expands out. It'll swallow up five hundred to eight hundred meters in no time! If you get caught in that, you'll end up in a photograph at an exhibit on the horrors of war!!"

"Seriously? Are you kidding me!? Then were those guys here to set this thing up!? There might be something hidden here!!"

"With something that large and heavy, they couldn't transport it by motorcycle, so they couldn't use their secret pipeline. They were forced to use a truck and that's when we ran across them."

"But it's just a bomb, right? Can't you defuse it!? Bombs are your specialty!"

"There's no time. There's only ten minutes left! It's waiting for a passcode in case it was accidentally activated, but that isn't enough time to analyze it!! If you want to live, start running! We need to get back to the helicopters!!"

Quenser and Heivia did not hesitate to flee the underground structure and they made sure to bring the investigation team and their guards with them.

As they ran through the long, narrow corridor, Quenser turned his radio back on, hit the switch, and explained the situation to the helicopters so they could leave immediately.

But that might have been a mistake.

"Ahhhhhh!! Shit!!"

As soon as they ran up the spiral staircase and out of the pump facility, Heivia swore.

They could see multiple helicopters taking off.

"Wait, dammit! Wait!! If we hadn't told you, you would've been surrounded by the acid cloud! We saved your lives!!"

"Sorry, but rescuing the injured takes precedence! Can you steal one of the enemy's trucks and escape on your own!?"

"Do you really think any of them are still running!? You were the ones that blew them up!!"

"Heivia, they aren't coming back! More importantly, everyone who's left needs to gather here. Anyone who makes a mistake here will be melted by acid!!"

Quenser heard a deafening sound resembling an amplified version of a shaken can of beer being opened.

A strange white cloud began to spread out not far away. It grew to the size of an Object in no time.

"That's the acid cloud," said Heivia as his face paled.

The giant cloud burst up from the underground structure like cotton candy. It exited the hole from the collapse and spread out across the desert. At the same time, it was likely entering the pump facility through the stairway leading up. That death had no gaps. Everyone would be wiped out.

"That thing spreads faster than a forest fire. Sixty kph was it!? It 'll overtake us if we try to escape on foot!!"

"We can escape."

"How?"

"Through the pipeline! The thick metal should hold it off temporarily! If we can escape beyond its effective range of several hundred meters before it dissolves the metal pipe, we can survive. It's a chance at least!!"

Quenser began running as he shouted his instructions to Heivia and the others using his radio.

"Wait, Quenser! That pipeline is falling apart. What if the pipe is completely broken partway down? The acid cloud will enter there and trap us!!"

"Would you rather stay here? Bye bye, Heivia. You can stick with 0%, but I'm going to bet on 1%. Even your dog tags will probably be dissolved, so we won't gather your remains!!"

"I get it! I get it, goddammit!!"

The pipe was rusty and falling apart. Cracks and large holes existed in places.

Quenser and the others ran inside that empty and sandy tube as quickly as they could.

"You've gotta be kidding me. You've gotta be fucking kidding me!!"

The acid cloud will hit in less than thirty seconds! Seal up the holes as best you can!! Use body bags or whatever to cover them and keep the acid cloud out!"

They knew it was not going to be perfect.

After some quick work, they ran down the two meter tunnel with all their strength.

They were soon surrounded by a sound resembling stir-frying.

“The acid cloud has caught up!!”

“It won’t break through the pipe right away! Keep running!!”

The pipeline had been created to carry over ten tons of liquid every second, so it had been built quite thick to withstand the internal pressure. But the sound of the metal being eaten away still squeezed at their hearts so much they forgot how thick it was.

“It’s only going to last two or three minutes.”

“We just have to make it a few hundred meters. That isn’t a marathon. We can escape to safety if we run as quickly as we can!!”

“Damn them, whoever they are! What do they want to hide so badly that they’re willing to ruin the environment like this!?”

“We can think about it after we survive!!”

Strange sparks seemed to explode in their heads and it became impossible to think about anything unnecessary.

They just ran and ran and ran and ran.

As they ran, the outside world had long since vanished from their minds. They began to feel like their goal had been filled with the acid and that the acid cloud had covered the entire world.

"Hot!?"

"There are cracks here and there. Keep running while covering your head with some kind of cloth! Stopping will only eat away at our skin!!"

Fortunately, the cracks were small and not much of the acid cloud seemed to be getting in.

But Quenser and the others did not have time to objectively evaluate the situation.

They could not tell if the dampness inside their uniforms was their sweat or their melted skin.

Even so, they continued running.

It was not exactly out of stubbornness. They were simply losing themselves in the simple action of running so they could avert their gaze from the certain death closing in on them.

"Quenser," Heivia finally called out.

Quenser could not imagine why he was calling out to him.

"Quenser! It's over. The sizzling sound is gone. We've left the range of the acid cloud."

"Ah? Eh?"

"We survived! We don't need to run any further. Do you want to destroy your own heart!?"

It took him a while to truly realize he had survived.

He eventually collapsed to a sitting position and could tell his lips were twitching.

After a few seconds, he finally realized he was smiling.

Part 6

Somewhere in Oceania, the muffled sound of a gun with a silencer could be heard.

Another young man looked down at a blonde woman with a bullet hole in her forehead.

"Case #023 complete. The objective was not achieved and it has been deemed a failure. To recover, Case #024 will now begin."

Part 7

Quenser worked hard to calm down Heivia who was seriously planning to punch the pilot of the slowly descending helicopter. Surprisingly, the intellectual-looking investigation team seemed to agree with Heivia. They were only human and anyone would be angry when their supposed comrades unreasonably abandoned them in an acid cloud.

"Calm down. If we all flip them off, they might fly away without us. We need to give them a smile with the kindness of a younger sister and the dependability of an older sister."

"Got it, Quenser. You're saying we act like a carnivorous plant, right? Once they open the helicopter door, their life is over."

The helicopter team must have felt bad because, when they opened the door, they handed out bottles of carbonated drinks they had found somewhere. The bottles were ice cold thanks to the icing spray for machineguns. There were some enticements one's senses could not resist. After running around in the 50 degree desert, this was more than enough to quiet them down.

The middle-aged male pilot explained the situation.

"The acid cloud is spreading out higher in the sky like a cumulonimbus cloud. We checked the weather map for the wind and there is a danger of running into it on our way back to the maintenance base. We want more accurate information if possible. "

"If that's the only reason you picked us up, I really will shove you out."

Growing stubborn was not going to accomplish anything.

The helicopter team's decision had not been wrong given all the injured they had and Quenser's group had indeed managed to hold on to their lives.

In that case, they needed to use their brains for something more important.

"So what do you think they were trying to destroy?" asked Quenser as the movements of the helicopter shook him. "Do you think it was those wooden boxes in the underground structure? Y' know, those fiber optic cables, the bolts, the nuts, and that strange powder."

Quenser stared at the photographs he had taken on his handheld device, but then he heard someone give a sudden cry of surprise.

It came from one of the intellectual infantryman who had helped them create the fake site for the bank account numbers.

"What is it?"

"I was searching for the master key to the net storage we discovered using those thugs' devices, remember? Well, I think I found something bad."

Everyone gathered around the slender infantryman.

All of the stern men stared at the small screen.

It had recorded phone calls, graphs showing the exchange of money, and documents on the group's projects and external cooperators. The infantryman displayed a summary file that looked like the minutes of a meeting.

"Concerning war recovery in Oceania and the influence that recovery provides within the country. A list of important infrastructure and how to drive a wedge into the provisional rule using the foundation of that infrastructure."

"Wait, wait, wait. This contractor, this one, and this one are all major construction companies doing a lot of work toward Oceania's recovery. Does this mean they're all helping out this group or being unwittingly used by them?"

"Well, even the large contractors are using local people to pave roads and lay pipes. To promote employment, they're actively seeking Oceanian personnel. These shady thugs could probably slip in there."

"No matter what plans those at the top make, the project will be delayed if the people at the bottom secretly don't do their job."

"Electricity, gas, water, schools, hospitals, phones, and internet. All of them are vital pieces of infrastructure."

"Delaying them will do a lot of damage to the provisional rule here. After all, that rule is really nothing more than a verbal promise. The people will lose faith if those promises aren't met."

"So either this group is actually causing this damage or they're using it as a threat."

"Either way, someone is definitely gaining great influence over the rulers of Oceania."

"It is necessary to remove the coalition made up of the four world powers and it is necessary that we then intervene as rulers ."

"Someone's trying to secretly shake up the provisional rule until it's powerless. They want to swap out the structure of the nation so they can bring their interests to the forefront."

"Does that mean it's us, the coalition force, that's in the way?"

"Dammit. That must be why they're paying off that international satellite TV executive, that blog king, and the others! They've brought the Oceanian people's anger to just under the boiling point using the failed infrastructure maintenance. What if they now release baseless rumors about the coalition from multiple influential sources? That will create an outlet for their pent up anger and large-scale riots will begin!!"

"We're stationed here in Oceania in the name of preserving order, so they're trying to guide international opinion to believe our presence is causing frequent riots that hurt or kill innocent people."

"Then they can do whatever they want. Our higher ups are only spending the military budget on this because the image of a savior hero is useful in politics and diplomacy. Once it isn't worth it anymore, the military might really leave."

"And then a new oppressive dictatorship will begin. This group will be able to hide behind a puppet leader."

"How to freely rearrange the national structure in the name of creating a modern justice system."

"The Oceanian military nation had the country working on a completely flawed rulebook. Giving the country proper laws will definitely be necessary."

"But when you remake the country's rules from the ground up, it's a lot easier for black-hearted people to work in loopholes than if they have to rearrange the system bit by bit."

"Is that like how it's easier for a baby than an adult to learn a foreign language?"

"Regarding the basic geographic conditions for a powerful nation."

"Oceania has massive amounts of land and underground resources. If they can secure the water resources needed for large-scale agriculture, they don't have to worry about food. Simply put, they have what it takes for an advantage in a long, difficult war."

"Almost the entire continent is made up of a single power and they're surrounded by ocean. Compared to countries that directly border a lot of other countries, they're a lot harder to invade. The conditions are similar to what North America once was and a nation known as the world police once existed there."

"If they create something similar here, it will cause problems in the world's military balance. Of course, that's what this group is probably trying to do."

Quenser and the others read the document while discussing its contents, but a fundamental question caused Quenser to frown.

"But what are they going to do with this new dictatorship? The Oceanian military nation did something similar, but they were stopped by the combined attack of the coalition force. No matter how many conspiracies they weave together, they'll be broken up as soon as the coalition notices them."

"The military nation is a great example of that. I doubt any conspirator would want to meet the same fate as the leader there."

"And the people here have to be the same. No one is going to think a riot can push back a fifty meter Object. Even a child would know that. Riots are meant to push with great numbers. If their front lines would be mowed down the instant they gathered, no one would gather."

"They need some kind of symbol of rebellion. But what possible symbol would people think could defeat more than twenty Objects ?"

"…"

Quenser glanced down at a handheld device.

This was not the one from the thugs. It was Quenser's own that the Legitimacy Kingdom military had issued him.

It contained a few photographs he had taken in the underground structure attached the remains of the pump facility.

The photos were primarily of the wooden boxes' contents.

One photo showed nuts and bolts divided by size.

One showed reels of fiber optic cable.

One showed bags of powder.

"Don't tell me…"

"What's wrong with a photo of nuts and bolts? You can buy those at home improvement stores the world over."

"But not the fiber optic cable. This is the type that greatly raises signal stability by injecting argon gas into the tube. The price per meter is ridiculous, so it isn't used in normal homes. It's a military product that's known as the nervous system of certain colossal weapons."

"Wait… A military product? The nervous system of colossal weapons? You don't mean…"

"And there's this powder."

Quenser gulped, zoomed in on the photo, and repeatedly read the bag's label. No matter how many times he read it, it still said the same thing.

"This is the substance that gives Object armor its high-heat resistance and reactive ability. It isn't used in anything else."

"Then that's the symbol of rebellion this group has built?"

When they thought about it, it was obvious.

Only one thing could pick a fight with the monstrous weapons that could withstand a direct hit with a nuclear missile.

They were synonymous with war.

They were 50+ meter masses of overwhelming military might.

"Were they using the pipelines spread out across Oceania's desert to slowly gather the parts for an Object!?"

Part 8

The group of helicopters taking Quenser and the others back to the maintenance base zone was not far from arriving.

But they could barely stand to wait even that long.

"We don't actually know when the Oceanian military government's 0.5 generation Object was built. If it was built by smuggling the parts through this network of pipes and this group

took over all that, it's perfectly realistic to think they've completed an Object!!"

"Quit analyzing and report this, Quenser! Damn, I bet our huge-breasted commander is still mad. I just hope she's willing to listen!!"

After they explained their thoughts over the radio, Froleytia responded bitterly.

"I have not forgotten about dealing with you two, but this isn't good. It explains why things have been getting noisy outside."

"What do you mean?"

"I have received a few troubling reports from the base's sentries . It seems a two or three thousand of the local people have gathered. They're only shaking the fence around the base and throwing small rocks, but we will have to forcibly make them leave if they do anything more. I want to avoid that while the journalists' cameras are here. Also, I didn't know what caused the commotion."

People's opinions varied, but the Legitimacy Kingdom military had not been all that hated by the Oceanian people.

"So they've already started delaying the infrastructure maintenance and pointing the people's anger our way."

"If they've already begun, that means it's really damn likely they've finished their new Object! I don't even feel like joking about this!!"

"But it takes nearly three years to build an Object from the ground up," said Froleytia. "There hasn't been enough time for a conspiracy thought up after seeing news of the Oceanian military nation's collapse."

"Wait a minute. Froleytia, you can't mean what I think you mean!!"

"We just have to calculate backwards. If they started this project three years ago, it started before…ksshhh…military nation's destruction…ksshh. That ridiculo-…ksshh…also part of their plan …kssssshhhhhh!!"

"Froleytia? Hey, Froleytia!? Can you hear me!?"

"You've gotta be kidding me. The military line has been jammed? By who? That alone qualifies as opposing us!!"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

Suddenly, a new voice came over the staticky radio.

It was a young man's voice.

"Welcome to our nation of Oceania."

"Really? We have to deal with this? I don't see how this could lead to anything good."

"I hear you have stubbornly survived the acid bomb and thus approached quite close to the truth. Even so, it is too late to do anything about it."

"We at least know you were involved behind the scenes of the military nation and their 0.5 generation Object.'

"Yes. They never had the money and technology needed to construct an Object on their own. As you probably know, that was built based on a downgraded version of the design data for an Information Alliance model known as the Gatling 033...no, I suppose you refer to it by the codename of Rush."

"Rush?"

Quenser frowned and recalled the "oh ho ho" laughter of that Information Alliance pilot Elite.

"But why did all of you so innocently believe that they had only constructed that one? If they can build one, they can build two. With the pipeline spread out across the entire desert and the one hundred terminal facilities connected to it, anything is possible. Our project had begun years and years before the fall of the military nation, so how many Objects do you think we have stocked up in that ant's nest?"

He used the plural.

That was enough for a chill to run down the spines of everyone in the helicopter.

Just one of those monsters was more than enough.

"You're lying. Objects are brand-name items that cost a billion dollars each. A single group can't build that many!!"

"Money can buy something even better. Money is meant to be spent, so there is no reason to hold back. Am I wrong?"

"Something even better?"

"The world police," said the young man over the radio.

That term was the symbol of an era.

"The world may have changed, but a North American superpower once had complete control of the world's military balance. That was an era of peace. But that exemplary nation was smashed to pieces by the flow of time! The home countries of the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance now exist there. It is not realistic to resurrect a single superpower there."

"You can't mean…"

"In that case, the only option is to find another area with similar conditions. A vast land surrounded by ocean. A single nation with plenty of food, underground resources, and population. All we need to do is supply information on high-level technology. …And there was only one candidate."

"Are you saying your goal is to remake Oceania into a second ' world police'!?"

"Is there any better way to recover from a war? If we succeed, we will put an end to the 'clean wars' spreading throughout the world. We will combine the different world powers into a single world power. And Oceania will rule at the center of it all. This continent was overrun with unreasonable war and then crushed by the different world powers afterwards, so it is the perfect symbol for the new world police."

"This is ridiculous," spat out Heivia. "All the dark history from the creation of the Oceanian military nation was your doing, wasn' t it!? The new world police? An era truly without war? A world created by people as heartless as you would be a horrible place! You just want to create a world where you can kill as many people as you want!!"

"I have only one thing to say to that: are you aware that history is something created by someone and recorded by someone?"

The young man's voice remained calm.

He was used to being accused of doing horrible things.

"And no matter how much of a commotion you cause, you can no longer change the current course of events. Look at the city below you. The angry cries of the crowd should reach you up in the sky. Do you know what that rumbling noise is? Those are the footsteps of the rioters marching through the streets. Can you pacify all of those people?"

"…"

Quenser stopped breathing for a moment.

He could hear a low, low sound resembling distant thunder. He peered down from the helicopter's open door and saw something filling the desert city. The sight of countless human heads filling every inch not taken up by buildings was quite chilling.

He saw something white here and there.

They looked like placards or banners, so Quenser naturally reached for his binoculars.

But Heivia grabbed his wrist before he could look through them .

"You should stop."

Heivia was looking up from his rifle's scope.

It seemed he had just looked through it.

"It's better to not see that. It's like a fishing hook. You'll try to pretend it's nothing at first, but you'll realize the small hook won't come out. It'll leave a wound."

Quenser could not imagine what would cause such a negative reaction.

Earlier that day, he had seen true enemy soldiers shot to pieces by helicopters and he had almost been killed by an acid bomb.

Compared to that, what could words do? Thinking that, Quenser's curiosity led him to look through the binoculars.

And…

"……
……
……"

He felt like he heard the words "I told you so" coming from a long distance away.

His arms hung limply down and the magnification left his vision, but what he saw left a hole in his chest.

He felt as if all the bloody vomit and crawling through the mud in Oceania had been made meaningless in a single moment.

This was not something one or two people could easily cause.

This was a powerful current.

Like a fad or a trend, something unseen was influencing people's lives.

Normally, only the advertising firms that created commercials were aware of that current, but it now created an obvious wall before Quenser and the others.

"What is this commotion?" asked Quenser as he stared blankly down at the city from the sliding door.

He received an answer from the young soldier messing with a handheld device they had received from the enemies.

“Wait. This isn’t good. This is really bad!!”

“Did you find another document?”

Quenser turned around and the soldier tossed him the device.

He caught it in both hands and finally realized what the small screen showed.

It was a completely normal video sharing site.

However…

“Ha ha ha. Have you discovered what everyone’s talking about ?” laughed the person on the radio.

But Quenser was not listening.

His mind had left reality as his eyes focused on the video playing on the screen.

It showed a few minutes of a human trafficking incident that had occurred at an international harbor in Oceania.

It had been uploaded only half an hour earlier.

The view count had already reached ten million. It was on a site used worldwide, but the video was a bit choppy as if it was having difficulty loading.

"The news is nothing but entertainment. They complain about the depressing incidents, but that does not stop people from searching for them. TV and newspapers used to have a lot of influence, but nowadays one will never learn anything without searching for themselves. And that gives people a certain enthusiasm."

The incidents and battles that were supposedly resolved were now being used for something else.

"And in Oceania where their infrastructure is being rebuilt, they lack the resources for entertainment. The people are starving for entertainment. Yes, they want to enjoy themselves. Merely opening a small hole in the dam leads to the result before you. The overwhelming deluge will sweep across the continent."

The young man on the radio spoke as if singing a lullaby that hid a cruel origin.

"The night sky. This world is a night sky."

It almost sounded like the lyrics to a song.

It sounded nice, but it seemed removed from reality.

"The starless night sky presses down on everyone from above and prevents them from seeing ahead. Someone must change this. Fortunately, that is not hard to do. Those who rule this dark era have merely convinced everyone that it is difficult."

The one who made it had to know that.

And the ones listening most likely knew it deep down.

"By raising stars onto the starless night sky, we can make a single flag. At first, our symbol will be pure indigo like the night sky. A single star is enough. If a single star can shine in the starless indigo night sky, we can begin to gently guide this dark era. Will you stand here in the center of the world or will you be forever driven to the edges of the world? Decide for yourself."

Even so, they would fall for it.

But why?

Was someone simply using the dissatisfaction of the Oceanian people?

Or was even that initial dissatisfaction something someone had input within them?

The video showed a few minutes of a large-scale clash between Objects in the desert night which had all been meant to kill a single soldier.

"Thank you. We put together many different plans and you ruined a few of them, but you provided us with an even greater tool," said the voice. "Truth Theater. That is the name of the video. When you take something formless, give it a name, and place it within a frame of your choosing, it provides a certain impression. That is the basic method of influencing people's impressions. After that, you only need to provide them with a specific direction. For example, you can create a flag that they take as their own symbol

without anyone forcing them. They will then spread the word of their existence around the world. The trick is to skillfully mix in the proper ideals and desires. The night sky flag is pure indigo, so it can easily be made by throwing a can of paint on a curtain. If you create a complex and cool-looking symbol, no one can create it for themselves. This is an application of influencing people's impressions."

There were no lies in the materials they had used.

However, the timing of the editing was extremely malicious. By showing only a few minutes in the video, it only showed the beginning of the problem and the growth of the chaos it produced. There were likely people watching it who did not even know these problems had been resolved.

"The stage has already been set. If it had not, I would not have so calmly contacted you. The indigo flag of the night sky could cover the entire continent at any time. When faced with this overwhelming maelstrom of people, both military and civilian, the military officials who are obsessed with clean wars will hesitate. That time lag will prevent you from ever catching up. Farewell. You have lost. Once only our victory remains, the world will greatly benefit and rejoice in its newfound peace."

"Tell me your name."

"Why?"

"I need something to write on your gravestone."

A short silence came from the radio.

The young man may have been laughing.

"You may call us the Company, Langley, or the Pentagon. When the former world police was lost, our true name lost its power and meaning."

"Do you mean…?"

"We are the ghosts of a bygone era. But if you wish to refer to us, there is a name you can use. We are the strange shadows dressed in black who are whispered of in every corner of the world . We are MIB."

At that moment, the transmission ended.

But not because Quenser or the MIB man had switched off their radio.

The transport helicopter shook violently as it was enveloped in an explosion.

"Wah!?"

"What is it, pilot!? What happened!?"

The helicopter's door was open, so Quenser had to cling to the handrail on the inner wall with all his might so as not to be thrown out.

The pilot's reply was tense.

"We were attacked from the surface! It was probably a cheap mortar."

"A mortar!? Those are used to fire shells farther than a grenade can be thrown. How are they using it for an anti-air attack!?"

"I don't know, but one just hit us! They forcibly used it beyond its intended use. Unlike a missile, it isn't guided, so they won't be able to reliably hit us!!"

"This is the hatred of the people," said the young man on the radio. "Those shells cost twenty dollars each. There is a reason they have long been a best seller in this world of never-ending wars."

"Here it comes! I just heard one being fired on the surface!! Avoid it, dammit! Move to the right!!"

"I don't have proper control after that last explosion!"

They did not escape in time.

As the helicopter shook, Quenser worked to close the door.

As soon as he did, the next explosion hit.

The steel door bent in and stabbed into the opposite wall. However, closing the door had not been meaningless. Without the door acting as a cushion, the blast and small pieces of shrapnel would have filled the helicopter.

Nevertheless, that blast settled it.

The helicopter did not break apart in midair, but it began to spin as it lost control. Their altitude was clearly lowering. The mass of steel was obviously falling toward the ground.

"What do we do!? Hey, what do we do!? I don't want to crash twice in one day! Can't you recover!?"

"I'm trying! But does it look like it's going well!?" shouted back the pilot.

Quenser felt dizzy as he braced himself so he was not thrown out of the reopened door.

The young man spoke from the radio as if to provide the finishing blow.

"Ha ha ha. Soldiers surrounded by a bloodthirsty mob. A tragedy like this might work as another symbol to drive out the coalition."

"Is this it!?"

Heivia forcibly switched off the radio and looked out the door.

He then shouted toward the cockpit.

"Hey, which way are we pointed!? I hope it's somewhere without any people!"

"It is! We're headed for a trash dump. The trash is piled up in hills and my sensors aren't picking up anyone!!"

"Good."

Heivia seemed to have made up his mind about something, so Quenser spoke to him.

"What are we going to do now?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

The helicopter continued to fall while almost scraping the roof of a crude five-story building.

Heivia leaned into the cockpit, used his knife to cut the seatbelt of the pilot who was still intently focused on the controls, and dragged him away.

"We jump out."

The screaming would not stop.

As if they were jumping out of a car headed for a cliff, Quenser and the others jumped out onto the flat building roof. The drop was only a few meters.

After a few seconds, the helicopter crashed into a giant pile of garbage and exploded.

They no longer had a means of returning to the base.

Part 9

The transport helicopter crashed into a city garbage dump. After a giant explosion, toxic-looking black smoke rose toward the heavens. Quenser stared at the sight as he rolled along the old concrete rooftop of a five-story building.

"Damn this hurts!! I didn't break any bones, did I!?"

"If you broke one or even cracked one, you'd be crying in pain, student! Quit giving in to the placebo effect and stand up. We need to get out of here!!"

"Is this place that bad?"

"Who do you think shot us down? It wasn't trained soldiers. Remember when we discussed this chaotic period of recovery in Oceania? Things are so bad people carry around weapons for self-…"

Heivia suddenly stopped speaking.

They heard a rumbling noise. It sounded like the cheers in a stadium after a hat trick. They worriedly looked down and saw a gold-colored tsunami rushing toward the helicopter which was still spewing black smoke.

The wave was made of people.

The gold was their hair. A group of hundreds or even thousands was approaching to drag out the crew of the helicopter.

They were all waving indigo flags. They must have painted or dyed something on hand because they were all bright and not entirely dried.

That starless night sky was the symbol of their dissatisfaction toward this dark era.

"Handguns, assault rifles, rockets, mortars, and more. If we don't leave while they're focused on the helicopter, we'll have nowhere to run," complained Heivia. "They're worked up enough that there's a real possibility of being dragged out and publicly executed."

Quenser gulped when he saw the other boy prepare his assault rifle.

"Wait, Heivia. Why are you preparing that?"

"This is no time to be idealistic!! Battle regulations mean nothing here. Order hasn't been restored in Oceania yet, so even housewives and office workers walk around with guns for self-defense. Those people with their night sky flag could start shooting at any time, so we need to defend ourselves!!"

"You can't. You can't do that!!"

Despite the danger of a secondary explosion from ammunition or fuel, the enraged crowd surrounded the helicopter and peered inside. They resembled ants crowding around a sugar cube. If they noticed Quenser and the others on the rooftop, they would obviously surround the building.

Quenser understood that.

He really did.

"There are hundreds if not thousands of them with the flags!! With that much of a difference, it doesn't matter if they're pros or amateurs. They'll ignore all their allies in every direction and fire on us. If that happens, we'll be more than just riddled with holes!!"

"But…!"

"But some of them aren't armed? We'll still meet a tragic end even if they catch us. In fact, the lack of deadly weapons will just make our grotesque fate last longer! Do you really think these people will be able to stop at just almost killing us!?"

They then heard a scraping noise.

Quenser looked over and saw the helicopter pilot scraping at the inside of a ring with a metal rod. The rod may have originally been a television antenna.

"What are you doing?"

"My wife's name is engraved in my ring. I am prepared to do what it takes no matter what happens, but I don't want to cause any trouble for my family!!"

The atmosphere was not normal.

Quenser was suggesting the obvious choice of "not fighting", but the others were treating that as strange.

They were being affected by the state of the nation.

If one side had guns, the other side had to have guns as well. That logic could only lead to a negative chain reaction, but it had begun to affect non-Oceanians like Quenser and the others.

Truth Theater.

They were being sucked into the world of that video.

The night sky.

That dark and hopeless era that the MIB had created was eating into Quenser and the others.

Heivia and the others who could use rifles took the lead as they moved from the rooftop and into the building. The stairway and corridors were deserted. The glass was covered in dust and sand, so the inside was dim. Several symbols had been left on the walls, so it may have been an abandoned building which was scheduled to be demolished.

What would happen if they ran across someone here?

What if someone lived here to escape the sand and rain? What if someone who lived nearby used it as storage space?

Quenser found it hard to breathe as he saw Heivia and the others unhesitatingly pointing their rifles around.

There was something wrong with it all.

Their enemy was not the people of Oceania. It was the "ghosts of a bygone era" known as the MIB who were laughing as they manipulated everyone. Getting into a firefight here would only delight them. They could use it to bring about their desire to drive out the coalition which was seen as the enemy of the Oceanian people.

Quenser understood the situation, but he could not suppress his instinctual fear.

The high-pitched sound of audio feedback struck his eardrums from outside the building.

It came from a cheap megaphone.

"Drive them away!! Don't allow their oppression any longer! The Legitimacy Kingdom helicopter crashed right next to a hospital. They are only thinking about their own interests! They don't care about our lives!!"

"Goddamn them! They're the ones who shot mortars at us!! And we went out of the way to crash into a garbage dump!!"

"Don't respond!! It won't solve anything if we get angry too!!"

"Then what are we supposed to do!? Do you think the cavalry is going to show up if we sit around long enough!?"

Suddenly, something else happened.

They heard a distant rumbling cheer similar to when a decisive goal was made in an international soccer match.

Quenser could not check outside the window.

There was a risk of being spotted, but it had more to do with his own fear.

He and the other seven continued running down the stairs.

Once they reached the first floor, Heivia reached for the back door near the stairway. He slowly turned the knob and cracked the door open.

The wall of people had already reached about thirty centimeters away.

They were so close that Heivia could almost smell their breathing and sweat.

The scent of the paint used to make the indigo flags was mixed in.

He desperately suppressed a groan.

They were almost all focused on the person speaking through the megaphone, so they were not facing toward the building.

With the delicacy of defusing a landmine, he took plenty of time to close the door that was only opened a few centimeters. He instinctually wanted to lock the door too, but that would make too

much noise. He used his reason to desperately fight that temptation.

"It's no good. They're everywhere outside."

"You mean we can't escape?"

Meanwhile, the megaphone voice continued.

"The cavalry is here! Our cavalry has arrived!! Open a path for the grim reaper to reach them!! Once this vehicle enters the plaza, they are done for!!"

Unpleasant sweat began to pour from Quenser's back.

If that was not a bluff…

"We will pursue our enemy no matter where they run! The sensors equipped on this .50 caliber heavy machinegun will ensure that! Whether it's wood or concrete, no shield will protect them!! We will search for them, find them, and then destroy them!! … What did you see in the Truth Theater? What did you feel as you waved the night sky flag? That is the truth!! That is the information that has not been altered by the media!!"

As Quenser stepped back from the back door, he frantically made use of his nearly panicking mind.

"(This is bad. Something different is approaching!)"

"(Has the MIB arrived after allying with the people? Now this interesting! We just have to destroy this machinegun-equipped off-road vehicle or whatever it is!!)"

"(But the people watching won't know where the line between pro and amateur is drawn! Once a single gunshot is fired, the people will attack us without end!!)"

Fortunately, the vehicle in question was apparently having difficulty approaching due to all the people filling every inch of the roads. It would not arrive immediately, but it was only a matter of time. This did not actually solve the problem.

Would they remain and fight?

Or would they leave and hide somewhere?

They had to make up their minds.

"(We can't run, Quenser! They said the heavy machinegun can shoot through building walls and it has sensors. No matter where we hide, we'll be killed. And the weapon's great penetrative power will bloody the angry mob as well!! We have to fight!!)"

"(But we can't survive if we fight! Also, there's no reason to fight!! Once a fight begins, it means we've lost!!)"

"(Then you can go run off on your own. Make a bet with me if you want, but I guarantee you I'll survive longer than you!!)"

Ultimately, there was no right answer.

No matter what they chose, they could not defeat the MIB. Eventually, the building would be surrounded and they would be filled with holes or torn limb from limb.

Reinforcements from the maintenance base zone would not arrive in time.

They were completely surrounded, so they would not find a convenient opening.

Once a single shot was fired, it was all over.

But was there any chance left of convincing these people without force?

"…"

The tension had made Quenser's breathing extremely shallow and he felt as if he would die from dizziness before the actual threat even arrived.

And…

And…

And…

The situation took a decisive turn.

A change that affected their survival occurred without them even knowing it.

Part 10

At that time, a certain girl looked up at the instigator mixed in with the crowd. The man stood on the roof of a European van parked on the road. He was making a loud announcement with the kind of cheap megaphone used at construction sites.

"Drive out the Legitimacy Kingdom! Get rid of the entire coalition!! They create nothing. They protect no one! Good citizens should take up arms and fight against these invaders!! Let the cavalry into the plaza so we can begin the bloodbath!! With its sensors, we can find them wherever they hide!!"

The girl was not caught up in what the man was saying.

Quite the opposite.

She knew that there were lies in the speech given by this man standing on the van and holding up an indigo flag. She had seen " them" firsthand, so she knew the rumors spreading through the city had definite malicious intent.

And so…

"…?"

A pause came in the enthralling speech.

This was because a small stone had flown at the man.

Everyone there turned from the man with the megaphone to the girl.

"I know the truth," said the girl. "I know it isn't true that they don't protect anyone!! They saved me. I was taken by bad people, but they came and saved me!! There wasn't any chaos like in Truth Theater!! There was more to it than that!!"

"Do not make such baseless claims!!"

Triggered by the man's angry shout, several nearby people grabbed at the girl's hair and began to drag her away.

She let out a high-pitched scream.

Some of the people accepted this as natural.

But some did not.

"Hey…"

"Yeah."

It started with a few young men.

They stood in the way of the men trying to carry away the girl.

One of the men holding her hair spoke.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Y'see, I don't really understand all this complicated stuff about good and evil or the coalition and invaders." The main young man shrugged. He moved his face in and spoke from close range. "But is this justice of yours something that lets bastards like you drag crying little girls around by the hair? If so, I can't go along with it."

The men holding the girl's hair prepared to silence this minority with their fists.

But then they realized the overwhelming majority was staring intently at their backs.

Which side had the backing of the majority was beginning to change.

At that time, an old woman named Dorothy opened an outdated laptop computer on a luxurious passenger ship away from Oceania. She logged in to an SNS site her grandchild had insisted she sign up for but she had not used since then.

She had noticed a commotion.

She had noticed great enthusiasm.

The short anonymously-uploaded video named Truth Theater had already been picked up by TV stations around the world. They seemed to have lost the pride in taking footage with their own cameras because the grainy video was being used as-is with the newscaster's voice playing over it.

On the internet, people could not see each other's faces or grab at their collars when they were angry, so it was filled with more extreme and hostile words than reality. One side supported Oceania slaughtering the coalition and declaring themselves independent. The other side said the riots would bring about oppression in their own lives, so they supported immediate military intervention.

But none of them knew the truth of Oceania.

They only knew what the few minutes of Truth Theater had showed them.

"I know the truth."

After giving it some thought, the old woman began slowly typing on the unfamiliar keyboard.

She was acting to protect the honor of the youths who had saved her.

She was beginning to fight back.

"I know the good and the bad of that country. You daydreamers want a convenient villain that lets you feel like you are watching a movie, but rethink what you say once you hear what I have to say. I promise that you will be ashamed of yourselves."

At that time, Sewax the battlefield cameraman sat within a box-shaped metal tent in arctic Siberia. He was checking over the

photos he had just taken with his single-lens reflex camera. Just like heat, extreme cold could cause malfunctions in precision equipment. Before his hard-won images could be lost, he began sending a backup to his online storage via a small satellite communications device.

His guide, who was closer to being a child then a youth, stared interestedly at the device.

"Hey, can you use that internet thing on there? No one bothers running lines out here. If they did lay hundreds of kilometers of fiber optic cable, a bear would just dig it up. And power lines would collapse under the weight of the snow."

Sewax had a sudden thought as he worked.

He had just trapped a piece of the truth in a rectangular frame and sent it out to the world, but how many people would it reach? And would that truth reach them accurately without someone twisting it?

Some intentionally twisted information was currently causing a frenzy on the internet, that information network the guide wished he had. As a professional photographer, Sewax had immediately noticed how much malice was contained within the few minutes of Truth Theater. A film specialist would likely have found two or three times as much as he had.

The truth could easily be twisted.

Rather than adding in lies, one only had to maliciously edit footage to give a certain impression.

But an athlete cheating with steroids was overwhelmingly powerful. Setting aside the ethical issues, that power was an objective fact. In the same way, the impact of manufactured footage could easily blow away a photograph showing the actual truth. In the end, the people wanted stimulation. The truth was but a single means of acquiring that stimulation and the original purpose of the truth had been done away with.

How much meaning did the world see in being "correct"?

The metal tent's walls had two layers so the air between could insulate it, but Sewax still felt a chill run down his spine.

It was then that the guide asked an innocent question.

"Hey, where were you before? You haven't been here for long, right?"

The question brought a slight smile to Sewax's face.

Because of the state of the world, there was something he could not easily give up on.

Little by little, he would sow the seeds of truth. They would outlast the long winter and eventually bud. It was true people sought simple stimulation, but the ring of truth was another form of stimulation.

People were cruelly honest.

Even if hundreds of thousands of lives were dependent on a photograph, people would look right past it if it was boring. If it seemed preachy, some would even insult it. At the same time, people from all over the world would view a video of someone's perfectly normal pet.

But the people also loved fairness to a surprising extent.

If it was an interesting story, they would flock to it whether it was true or not. And so Sewax decided he would aim for that. Simply saying one had the truth was not enough. The proper way to compete was to present an overwhelming true story that had enough interest and appeal to break past the empty entertainment.

No matter what anyone said, the more interesting story would win in the end.

He swapped out the micro memory for his digital single-lens reflex camera and slowly spoke as he displayed photos of the previous battlefield he had traversed.

"These photos are from the country of Oceania. What do you think happened there?"

At that time, a female soldier missing an arm appeared at a court martial in a European safe country. The court martial had entered a short recess, but the media's cameras would not leave her.

These cameras did not merely belong to this one safe country. Large news stations were broadcasting this to many different countries and regions.

"A hero? You may say I exposed corruption, but I was closer to being someone who carried out dirty work for the military. I believe the title of hero should be given to someone else."

She used the accurate movements of her prosthetic arm to pick up a paper cup of iced coffee and smiled thinly on a bench in the corridor outside the court room.

"Setting aside issues of good and evil, I was certainly a nuisance within the military. In fact, I may still be. But even amid a conspiracy to assassinate a nuisance like me, someone still jumped into the line of fire to save me. In the end, he even stood before an Object. People like that are what soldiers should be. My way of returning the favor is to guide the military toward accepting people like that."

She spoke slowly as if recalling something.

"There are definitely people who should be called heroes. But unfortunately, those people rarely refer to themselves that way. I wish to show my respect for all the soldiers working in Oceania.

Even if they will not name themselves heroes, I hope the day will come when everyone else will."

At that time, an Information Alliance pilot Elite, who the two idiots referred to as the "oh ho ho", was speaking to the world via a large-scale internet concert.

"The Information Alliance fights for the proper use of information and for a better future, so we have received some unwelcome news. The MIB? The world police? World domination using an unknown Object made with new technology?"

By usurping the continent of Oceania, they would begin to change the world's military balance.

"Normally, I would manipulate your impression of this incident by reading off a predetermined script with a perfect smile."

But that did not mean only someone at the center could have an influence.

The world had grown smaller.

The overwhelming electronic network allowed people to influence the other side of the globe in real time.

"Who is right and what is accurate? Try thinking for yourselves for once Oh ho ho."

It started as a small wave.

But it slowly worked its way deep into the hearts of the people whose impressions had been manipulated.

It was similar to the difference between a natural diamond and an artificial one.

Which one would draw people in the most?

The answer was revealed by their actions.

"What?"

As they glanced around from within the abandoned building, Quenser and the others quickly picked up on that difference.

"The atmosphere has changed. The burning anger is being directed elsewhere."

The powerful emotions of anger and intent to kill would stab into one's heart. Some martial arts had honed it into an actual technique to throw of an opponent's timing, Quenser and Heivia were not martial arts experts, but the level of emotion surrounding them was on a tremendous scale. Despite being used to clean wars, they could detect the change in the situation.

The crowd never broke down the door and rushed in. The MIB vehicle equipped with a machinegun was stopped as if something blocked its way.

"How odd… Something isn't right outside." The windows were boarded up, but Heivia peered through the gaps between boards. " I don't see any of those indigo night sky flags. Did everyone throw them away?"

That was when a slender hand poked out from a corner of the corridor.

It was beckoning to them.

"You can escape this way," whispered a female voice.

At first, no one moved.

They thought it was a trap.

If they approached, they suspected they would have a bag placed over their head and be taken away.

But doing nothing would not improve their situation.

Quenser was the first to step forward.

“Wait, Quenser! Are you really trusting her!?”

“Something happened while we waited here without firing a shot, so we need to go with this change. It can’t hurt to take advantage of the opportunity we won for ourselves!!”

Heivia glanced down at the assault rifle in his hands.

He uncomfortably clicked his tongue as if he had only just remembered what it was and who he was aiming it at.

“Damn, I can’t believe Heivia, the transcendently handsome, genius, and rich noble, lost track of what he was doing. When a lady calls out to you, you don’t point this at her!!”

The overall atmosphere changed once Quenser and Heivia approached the door.

Heivia was a private and Quenser was a student while most of the other surviving soldiers were ranked higher. There was no reason for them to follow.

But the helicopter pilot spoke up.

"I was told to follow the infantrymen's lead if I crashed, so I'll leave it to you. Anything's fine as long as we make it back to the maintenance base alive!"

One of the middle-aged soldiers who had to be ranked higher than Heivia shrugged as well.

"As the ranking officer here, I'll say I made the decision based on a suggestion from a soldier under my command. This situation is so far outside the norm, I can't keep up! You can take the lead!!"

All of the soldiers, including the injured, ran toward the corner of the corridor.

A brunette woman was waiting for them and she led them through the building. They arrived at what looked like a dead end due to large piece of trash, but she found gaps leading through it and to a small door. The door led to a narrow back road that the crowd did not cover.

"Is this a shopping district?"

"All of them are old stores that sell tools for craftsmen. They all have trash filling the front like that, so only the regular customers ever visit."

They thanked the woman and cautiously continued along the road. As they did, the owners of the various small shops called out to them.

"I only have ointment and bandages, but do you want some?"

"I was just watching TV and it looks like you're doing some cool stuff. If we help you, you'll crush that conspiracy, right? I don't really understand, but do what you have to!"

"Don't make yourself ill by drinking old water! Here, have these sports drinks!!"

"Do you have enough ammo? If you can use 5.5mm, take as much as you want!!"

Some of the offers were rather dangerous, but Quenser and the others did not hesitate to accept. They had yet to resupply after an unexpected battle, so they had no reason to refuse if they could replenish their ammunition here.

"Hey, Quenser, where do we go now!? Do we return to the maintenance base!?"

"They're surrounded by their own mob, remember? And we don't know how far this miracle has spread. We should defeat the MIB behind all this and return once everything has calmed down!"

"I agree with that, but do you know where their secret base is? They've set up their conspiracy all across Oceania!! I doubt they'll conveniently show up right in front of us!!"

"I disagree," declared Quenser. "If you think about it, it doesn't make sense. Our helicopter was a top-priority target, so would they really leave its destruction to an angry mob? It would be safer to mix in with the crowd and fire the mortar themselves. Also, mortars fire a shell in a long arc toward their target. No amateur

could do anything as tricky as hitting a flying helicopter with one. And don't forget the heavily armed vehicle that was on its way to the plaza."

"Are you saying the MIB's headquarters are nearby?"

"They used the desert pipeline and the terminal facilities it connected. Heivia, where's the closest facility? It can be for oil, underground water, or whatever else."

"It's nearby. It's less than three kilometers away! No one felt any need to pay attention to some old ruins."

"That must be it. And their headquarters are probably where their Object is!"

Heivia's expression stiffened.

"Wait. Are you suggesting we battle that monstrous weapon in a group with lots of injured!? I doubt we could win and it's pointless anyway. The MIB have more than one Object, remember? What good is it to risk our lives to destroy just one!?"

"Do they really have that many?" Quenser grinned. "They are an ideological group that came from a spy organization of a former superpower. They must be experts at manipulating information. Would they really reveal the entirety of their plan like that? Would they really just brag about everything? Not a chance. They wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"Then…"

"Once the acid bomb failed to kill us and part of their plan was about to leak out, they panicked. Completely erasing leaked information is hard, but that's why they chose to distort it by overwriting it with new information. That allows them to hide the overall outline of their plan."

The mortar attack had shot down their helicopter immediately after the chat with the MIB.

Quenser and the others' first action would be to contact their maintenance base by radio. They would be afraid of dying without passing on the information they had gained, so they would report everything without thinking about its veracity.

As a result, the decoy information would be passed to their superior officer.

That false fear would spread from Quenser's group and to the entire military.

"It may be true they are developing Objects, but they can't use that many at once! Hell, if they did have that great a fighting force, they wouldn't be sneaking around! They could just challenge the coalition to a direct fight!! This is the age of numbers. In a one-against-three battle, a unit will not hesitate to send out the white flag signal and withdraw. Those are the rules yet they didn't do that. That means they lose when it comes to numbers!!"

Quenser was guessing the MIB had only one or two functioning Objects at present. If the coalition's ten or more Objects surrounded them, they would be destroyed in the blink of an eye.

"But they're trying to become the world police! Their plan is to take over Oceania because it has the ideal geographical position. They need more than one Object to protect such a vast area of land. They want to conquer, rule, and control the world, so they need a ton of Objects!!"

"Their preparations aren't ready yet. That's why they tried to make us believe they can readily attack with several Objects. They're trying to buy time! Once the time comes, tons of new Objects really will appear across Oceania!!"

"If you're right, the first thing they'll want to do is give credibility to their claim. Will they use their one Object to provide an effective demonstration? Even if that one is destroyed, they can buy the time they need as long as it scares the coalition enough. Then they can finish preparing the rest."

"I don't know what scale their plan is on, but they won't have gone this far if they knew they would lose. Whether it's through sheer numbers or some kind of trick, they definitely have something we can't let them finish."

"Wait a second. The coalition has over ten Objects stationed here. Are you saying they're preparing something that can defeat that?"

Battles without Objects tended to become long and drawn out.

But this was different.

This would become a long, drawn out battle between Objects.

If that happened, it was impossible to say just how much apocalyptic destruction would spread across Oceania. The distinction between battlefield and city would vanish. The combatants would not have the leeway to make the distinction. It was possible that all life on the continent could be wiped out.

"That's why we need to crush it," said Quenser. "We'll make the MIB's demonstration completely fail and nip this problem in the bud. There's no other way to save everyone."

Part 11

Atomic number 79.

Atomic weight 196.96655.

Atomic symbol Au.

In other words, pure gold.

That was supposedly the source of their massive amounts of money.

The world had shattered to pieces in the past. The collapse of the UN and the appearance of Objects were the symbols of the existing national structure coming to an end. Amid the confusion, they had stolen a massive amount of gold bars from a certain country which had possessed more than any other nation.

Normally, this would have been immediately exposed and they would have been ganged up on, but the world had been in a state

of complete chaos. They had taken advantage of a situation in which no one could determine what was stored where and in what quantities.

That thought brought a twisted smile to the lips of a young man wearing all black.

In the past few years, his smiles had become very different from what they had once been.

"Such a terrible lie. Even a child could see all the holes in it if they thought about it."

"That is why we must ensure they do not have time to think about it," said another young man sitting next to him. "We have plenty of money. We have the power to move the world. As a rite of passage for joining our secret community, we take half of their assets as collateral. …That is the trick to securing the funds we need. A single lie provides the money and connections we need to truly change the world."

"The truth will eventually come out."

"We simply have to change the world before that happens. We just have to make the lie into the truth."

That was how they lived.

It was no different from how their predecessors had used information as a weapon to protect the peace of a superpower.

Even before the internet had become common, back when information was only passed through letters and phone calls, they had cut out newspaper articles, recorded radio programs, and otherwise analyzed everything so they could classify the complicated state of humanity around the globe. …Even the internet had begun as a single nation's military network. Spreading that information network around the world had been their accomplishment and its influence plainly proved how much influence they had shown upon the vague concept of the "era" or " history".

"The preparations are complete."

That report was given by and to someone wearing a black suit, a black hat, and black sunglasses.

They had no individuality.

It was unnecessary and, more importantly, they themselves did not see any use in it.

"I see."

The Company, Langley, the Pentagon.

They were called many different things, but they never used the three letter acronym that began with C.

They preferred to use the one beginning with M that had its origin in inaccurate urban legends.

Yes.

The MIB.

That was the name of the intelligence agency in the deepest depths of the world police which had been rumored to suppress the truth by threatening witnesses of UFOs and aliens.

“Is the enemy coming?”

“They were not torn limb from limb in the public square, so they must have made their way out somehow. In that case, they are on their way here. Being so cautious as to thoroughly investigate even innocent citizens is our way.”

There was a simple reason for purposefully using that inaccurate name.

They were not yet worthy of using the true name. Their goal was to gather together the world which was broken like stained glass and once more rule it as the world police. Only once they accomplished that would they return to their true form.

The C at the beginning of their name stood for “central”, but they currently had nothing to be at the center of. An egg would not function with only the yolk. For that reason, there would be no meaning in using their true name at the present.

They would wait until it was all over before they proudly used those three letters as they gave their name to the world.

“Then let us begin the final preparations.”

"You can begin at any time."

They were trying to do the same thing that had been left behind more as legends than actual history.

Rather than standing on the stage themselves, they would use money, information, weapons, and political power to quietly contact and build relationships with people connected to other nations. At times they would invite them in, at times they would threaten them, at times they would kill them, and ultimately they would manipulate the fate of that country.

"I know. Leave the rest to me. If I can buy enough time to activate the other two and the approximately five hundred amplification facilities, we can announce our victory to the world."

"We have been expecting this, but are you sure you can handle it?"

"It is true I am not an Object pilot Elite."

A young man smiled thinly.

He wore all black just like the others, but his aura was sharper.

"But that is what gives this meaning," he said. "So…"

His last word seemed disconnected at first.

But then he pulled out a handgun with a silencer attached.

"Leave the rest to me. Case #024, the attempt to use the rioters to kill the soldiers who had grasped the truth, is now over. Nevada 36, it is time to begin Case #025. That will be handled by me, D.C. 0 ."

Part 12

Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of their small unit somehow managed to leave the confused streets that were overflowing with people.

Once they left the city, they entered the desert, but this was the cracked and sand-colored land of the wastelands seen in westerns. Some cacti and a run-down bar would have made it perfect, but those did not seem to be common sights in this desert.

Instead, they found train cars lying around with their insides removed. The electronics, doors, windows, chairs, and lights were all missing. This appeared to be a "graveyard". Originally, the unusable cars had been carried to the end of the rails and dismantled, but even the guiding metal rails and railroad ties had been stolen at some point.

"I can see it now. In fact, it would be impossible to miss. Do they have any idea how to hide?"

The terminal facility which had several rusty pipelines connected to it appeared to have originally drawn oil up from the ground. The exterior was a bit more cluttered than the

underground water pump facility. They were both ruins which had been left to rot and this facility clearly would not function any longer.

Quenser looked around with a binoculars-like device.

"I don't see any obvious traps. There aren't any mines, alarms, or cameras, but I doubt conspirators like this would simply be careless."

"Setting up traps would just end up blowing off the leg of an unrelated civilian or kangaroo. They aren't trying to protect this spot at all costs. Explosives aren't a good idea when you want to keep anyone from knowing you're there."

Even so, there were landmines made from wood or glass that a metal detector would not catch. Quenser's group remained cautious and used the chaotically abandoned train cars as cover as they slowly approached the terminal facility.

"There aren't any scavenging hyenas around, are there? Heivia, even you might shoot if someone surprises you right now."

"There's nothing but fried chicken bones here. They were left here because there's nothing left to eat."

Just as there was no sign of traps, there was no sign of people.

The old oil facility was about five hundred meters away, but their confidence in that being the MIB's headquarters began to waver.

"Is this really the logical way for them to handle this? Some kids playing hide-and-seek could wander into the terminal facility and they wouldn't stop it."

"Or maybe they no longer care if they're found out," ominously suggested Heivia.

Immediately afterwards, the remains of the oil facility were easily blown to pieces from the inside.

They first detected an intense shaking in the cracked ground. Next, they saw a massive cloud of dust spreading out. They could see it happening, but there was nothing they could do. The sea of dust spread out in every direction for kilometers and it swallowed up Quenser's group.

The phenomenon itself was similar to a sandstorm.

A thick gray wall hid even the sunlight over a limited area. The brightness of the sky dimmed as if evening or dusk had fallen.

"Cough cough!! What the hell is this? Concrete!?"

"Grab a handkerchief, a bandage, or whatever you can find! Just cover your nose and mouth! That old building was from the time of the military nation, so it wasn't built up to safety standards. It might have used asbestos. Protect yourself now if you don't want to regret it later!!"

Quenser heard a low rumbling as if distant thunder clouds were approaching.

A giant shadow was visible through the gray world that cut off their vision.

It used static electricity for propulsion. It had two straight floats lined up parallel to each other. They were reminiscent of the treads on construction equipment.

Its silhouette was somehow different from a normal Object. It did not have the one hundred or so cannons extending from its spherical body like a sea urchin. It looked like a soccer ball with uniform protrusions attached or perhaps like the sea mines placed to destroy warships. The protrusions looked more like giant barnacles than cannons. It looked like the Object had volcano craters attached. It was unclear what they were meant to do and that uncertainty weighed on Quenser's mind all the more.

His instincts turned toward the giant structure and all his senses grew more focused.

His thoughts grew clear.

The scorching heat, the dryness stabbing at his throat, and unpleasant dust clinging to his cheeks were all driven out of his mind.

His soul was shouting that he did not have even a second to worry about such trivial things.

"There it is," muttered Heivia while forgetting to cover his mouth amid the dust cloud. "We were right! The MIB really did build one! They sacrificed the Oceanian military nation to build an Object completely independent of the world powers!!"

"Get down. Everyone, get down. …Has it noticed us? Why did it destroy its hiding spot and make an appearance?"

The gray curtain prevented them from judging the distance. The giant shadow looked both close and distant. At the very least, they could tell it was not performing the light footwork of a boxer or mixed martial artist like the princess's Baby Magnum would. It appeared to be perfectly still.

"What is it doing? Surely they know revealing it like this is a huge disadvantage for them. So why isn't it doing anything? They wouldn't make an appearance like that for no reason."

It was not that an obvious attack would have put them at ease.

Their hearts were filled with an uncanny feeling similar to viewing a newly discovered insect under a magnifying glass.

That was when an electric tone came from Quenser's radio.

Froleytia was contacting them.

"Where are all of you!? It seems you vanished from the crashed helicopter."

"Wow, a lecture now!? I don't feel like explaining everything. What should we do, Quenser!?"

"Don't press the button! Once everything is over, we can destroy the radio on the way back to the base."

"If you don't respond, I'll write a report saying you died."

"We're alive!! We're doing just fine!!" shouted the two idiots as loudly as they could.

Froleytia clicked her tongue.

"Where are you? What appears to be an unidentified Object has appeared three kilometers from the city. Does that have anything to do with you?"

"We happen to be right in front of it."

"Move five hundred meters away. You'll be killed if you're caught in the bombardment."

"What!?"

Suddenly, another voice cut in.

But they did not recognize this one. The transmission was not coming from the Legitimacy Kingdom military.

"Can you hear me, dogs of the Legitimacy Kingdom? I am monitoring the situation via satellite."

"Who is this?"

"A lieutenant colonel who saw what your battalion can do during the Simple Is Best battle. My name is Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. You can ignore everything but the first name. A lot of people have the other names thanks to a ridiculous genius girl project. Over a hundred, I think."

Quenser brought a hand to his forehead.

"I remember now. I saw you in that VIP Information Alliance armored vehicle in the desert night. You're that officer who's young enough to still be in her rebellious phase."

"Are you the type of soldier that never forgets a lady's face? I see. How horribly shallow."

Quenser was actually a student, but explaining the details to someone from an enemy nation would only increase his danger.

That member of the Martini Series spoke with scorn filling her voice.

"The four world powers have managed to work together long enough to help with Oceania's war recovery. Our coalition will not allow anyone else to possess an Object. I hate to release one of the Information Alliance's cutting edge machines to protect your pathetic lives, but I am calm enough to keep my priorities straight. You can rest easy now, but do not forget to bow down before me in gratitude."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

"The coalition…?"

"Does that mean multiple Objects have been sent out to hunt down the MIB?"

Their response came from Froleytia Capistrano rather than Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

"The Legitimacy Kingdom has sent the Baby Magnum, the Information Alliance has sent the Catapult Cargo, the Capitalist Corporations has sent the Desert Scorpio, and the Faith Organization has sent the Mirror Bowler. They will surround this unknown Object and destroy it."

"Refer to our second generation Object as the Cannon 256. Hearing your codename makes me want to vomit."

"Quenser, Heivia, and everyone else there, listen up. The real problem comes after the unknown Object is destroyed. There is a possibility the four coalition Objects will begin fighting afterwards. Keep your guard up if you don't want to be crushed by a stray shell."

Those were frightening words.

With four against one, the outcome was readily apparent. That was how modern wars worked.

Which meant…

【カタパルトカーゴ】
CATAPULT CARGO

全長… 80メートル

最高速度… 時速550キロ

装甲… 5センチ×200層（溶接など不純物含む）

用途… 陸戦専用第二世代(フロート換装により海上巡航も可能)

分類… 多用途精密砲撃兵器

運用者…『情報同盟』

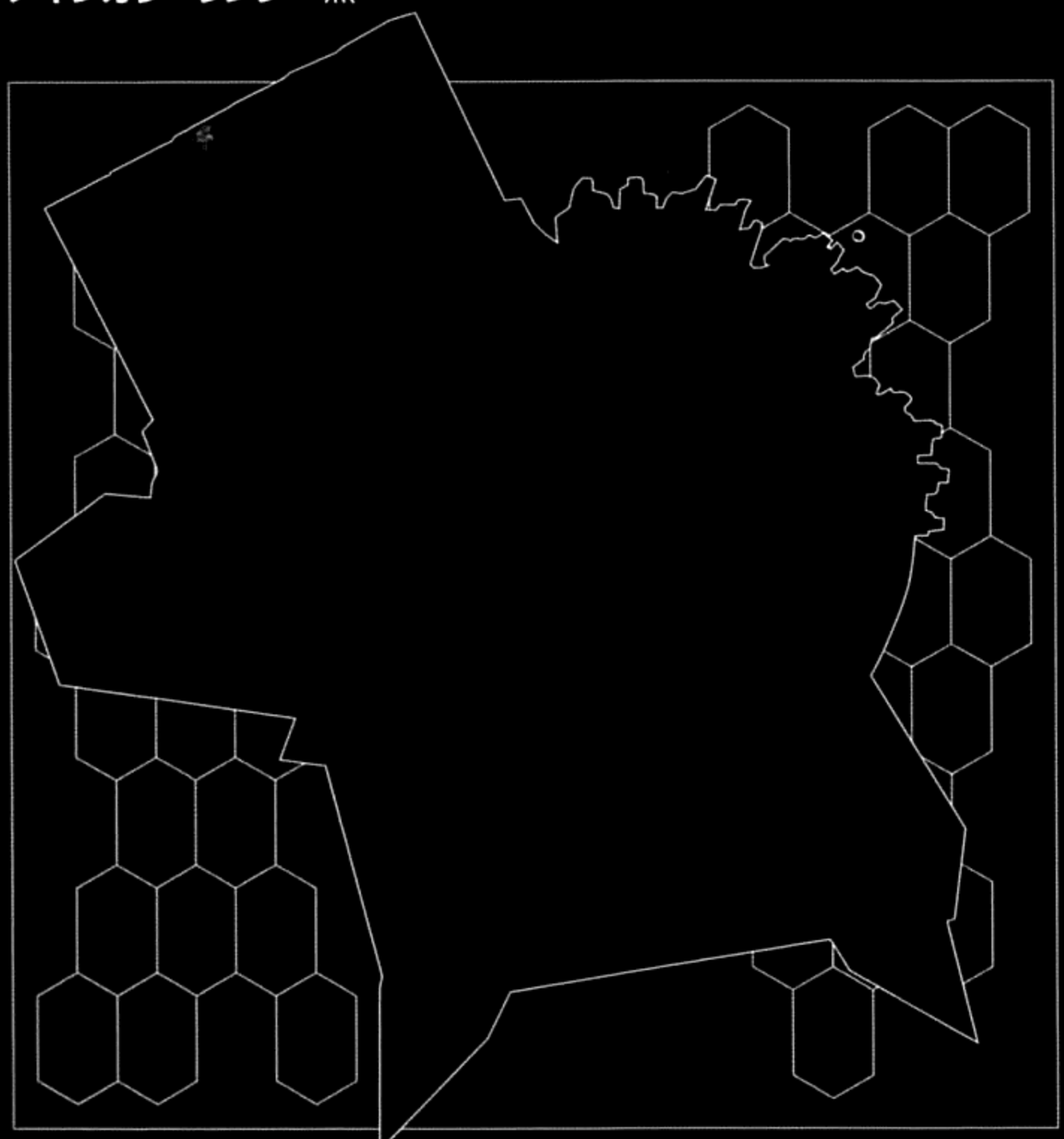
仕様… 静電気式推進装置

主砲… 切り替え装填式コイルガン×1

副砲… 下位安定式プラズマ砲、レールガンなど

コードネーム… カタパルトカーゴ（様々な薬品などを装填した砲弾を切り替えて撃ち出すところから。なお、『情報同盟』ではカノン256と呼称）

メインカラーリング… 黒



CATAPULT CARGO

"Hey, Quenser," said Heivia. "We came here hoping to be heroes, but there's nothing for us to do. Let's use this confusion to get the hell out of here. I don't want to be here once the bombardment begins."

"It's too late for that," replied Wraith instead of Quenser. Her lovely voice showed no mercy. "It has already begun."

When the great roar arrived, they sensed it in their guts more than their ears. The gray dust obstructing their view was blown away like a popped balloon. Quenser initially thought it was the sound of a shell being fired, but he quickly realized he was wrong. It was the shockwave created by the car-sized shell travelling at five or ten times the speed of sound.

He could not simply brace himself and grit his teeth.

He had gotten down on the ground, but he began rolling across the wasteland as if he had been ripped from the ground.

He brought a hand to his ear and felt something wet.

He saw red blood on his hand.

"Cough!! What the…hell was…that? Was that a railgun or coilgun they fired from long distance!?"

"It's the same either way!!"

"No, a coilgun uses electromagnets while a railgun uses Fleming's…"

"I'm glad to see bleeding from the ears doesn't slow down your design obsession!!"

The MIB's Object was sitting in place. If an ultra high speed shell was sent in, it would not have time to evade. While Quenser and Heivia's puny human bodies trembled from the damage caused by the shell merely passing by, they checked to see what damage the Information Alliance had accomplished.

A giant cloud of dust filled the air.

More attacks flew toward the Object as if stabbing a sword into an unmoving corpse. The types of attacks and the directions they came from were different. Laser beams left orange afterimages as they fried the air and low-stability plasma cannons burned bluish-white lines of light into their eyes.

It was a slaughter.

The Object was simply being disposed of.

"Wait, wait, wait! Goddammit! Cough cough! This is going too far!! You're going to kill us too!!"

"No, wait."

They then saw something unbelievable.

"What the hell?"

"Don't ask me."

The countless attacks blew away the dust as they focused on a single point.

That tore away the filthy veil.

And on the other side…

"The MIB's Object hasn't been touched! And it doesn't look like it's moved either. Did the Information Alliance miss!?"

"I'm not a psychic girl, so I don't have the answer to everything!!"

The speed, mass, and force had all been sufficient. It was hard to think they had deflected all of the attacks with just the Object's armor.

The Information Alliance had not given advance warning of their attack.

They continued firing the same massive shells toward the MIB Object.

As they roared through the air, they possessed so much destructive power that Quenser and the others thought they were going to be crushed as they watched on.

But this time, they clenched their teeth and saw what happened.

"It missed?"

"What? How did it land there!? It couldn't have landed there unless its path twisted like a crank. I've heard of lasers bending due to mirages, but can that happen with metal shells too!?"

The dust cloud had not been created by the destruction of the target Object. It had come from the metal shells and laser beams veering away and striking the ground.

But was that a coincidence or not?

Escaping into optimistic thought was not going to help, so Quenser voiced the worst possibility.

"It has some kind of defense system. It has some kind of tech that lets it turn aside and neutralize approaching attacks!!"

The sound of someone clicking their tongue came over the radio .

Next, multiple beams of light were fired. The burning orange beams likely came from laser beam cannons while the bluish-white beams that resembled welding likely came from low-stability plasma cannons. These were not metal shells. Light and ions were completely different, so a defense system meant for metal shells would not work.

And yet…

"You're kidding."

"It doesn't matter how powerful your attacks are if they can't hit. I don't know what it's using, but any Object loses all of its cards if this almighty one can repeatedly turn aside any attack!!"

It did not matter.

It did not matter if it was a metal shell, a band of excited light, or a plasma weapon given directionality with tremendous magnetism.

Each Object present was a crystallization of its world power's technology. Their concept had been honed to the extreme.

One of them primarily used metal shells but could use many different types of attacks using the container structure filled with powerful acid and the gas that created low-stability plasma.

One of them would intentionally fire laser beams at the ground around the target to turn the sand to glass and then use that glass to complexly reflect its main laser beam cannon.

One of them scattered several electron beams like firing a shotgun to constantly cause light damage while using high-quality sensors and boosters to continually avoid the enemy's attacks.

The MIB's Object dealt with all of them in the same way.

It had perfected turning aside attacks.

Rather than evading, it caused the approaching attacks to miss.

And it did not stop there.

"The Capitalist Corporations' Desert Scorpio is damaged!" came a report over the radio. "For some reason, the Faith Organization's Mirror Bowler fired on it!!"

"Don't get mad, Legitimacy Kingdom. We may be surrounding the unknown Object, but our positions make damage from stray shots impossible. That means there must be another explanation for this damage."

"Are you saying the laser beams the unknown Object turns aside are being targeted at our Objects?"

This time, Quenser felt as if an invisible hand were squeezing at his heart.

"This is more than a means of defense. It isn't just turning them aside! What kind of technology lets it accurately target someone else with an attack coming in at the speed of light!?"

"Tch." Wraith clicked her tongue. "If long-distance bombardments are out, our Cannon 256 has lost its usefulness. Your outdated first generation can take the lead role. Move in close and fire on it at point blank range."

"Tell that to our princess!!"

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Keep firing shells at it!! Even if you can't hit, try to keep them focused on defense!!"

Before he had even finished speaking, Quenser's mind was shaken by a terrifying roar.

But this was not supporting fire from the Information Alliance's Cannon 256.

The MIB's Object had started to do something.

At first, Quenser, Heivia, and the others had difficulty concluding what it was trying to do.

A ring of bluish-white light with a radius of around 200 meters had appeared around the Object's spherical main body. As time went on, more and more rings appeared. Eventually, they formed what looked like a semispherical dome that covered the entire main body except for the very top.

The bright light completely hid the giant Object.

"You have got to be kidding."

Quenser finally realized what was happening.

As soon as he did, he felt like his heart was being wrapped tightly in wire.

"Are those laser beams or low-stability plasma cannons? No, it must be electron beams."

"How can you tell!?"

"Anything else would have blinded us." Quenser continued to watch on. "That bastard is bending his own attacks into a shield. Like a large particle accelerator, it's constantly adding electron beams and accelerating them, so the speed and energy grows as time passes!"

"Ha…ha ha. The European particle accelerator out in the middle of nowhere is buried deep underground, right? Isn't that to stop the electromagnetic waves and radiation that leaks out when the beam bends around the curves? Is it really safe to accelerate stuff in the middle of the air?"

"Do you really think that monster is up to safety standards!? These people didn't hesitate to use an acid bomb, so they aren't going to care about the safety of enemy troops! And more importantly…!!"

As Quenser tried to shout, an electron beam shot by overhead after being accelerated to the limit. The principle was not all that different from the hammer throw. However, the speeds were too great for the human eye to follow, so Quenser and the others were suddenly presented with the result.

And that result was the distant roar of the Information Alliance Object being destroyed.

"What the…hell?"

Heivia looked over his shoulder even though there was no way he could see it.

His voice was trembling as much as it ever had.

Unlike a normal low-stability plasma cannon or laser beam cannon, this attack was not limited to an instant.

It continued.

It continued on and on.

It was less a projectile and more a giant sword extending beyond the horizon.

And that "sword" was swung to the side.

It swept by horizontally.

This destruction was on a scale of greater than ten kilometers, so the fear Quenser and the others saw with their eyes did not produce real fear in their brains.

As they watched in a daze, they heard the urgent "truth" over the radio.

"E-e-eeeeeeeee!? Wh-wha-what…?"

"Do not panic, analyst!! Provide an accurate report!!"

"Y-yes, major! The Information Alliance's Catapult Cargo has been destroyed. The Faith Organization's Mirror Bowler has been destroyed. The Capitalist Corporations'…"

"Hey, wait! I can't move! E-eject! Ksshhhhh!!"

"…Desert Scorpio has been destroyed. The Legitimacy Kingdom's Baby Magnum…"

It was like a cruel stroke of a pen.

No matter what technology was used to skillfully evade, the never-ending electron beam sword swept across the world. Once it caught up, it sliced the Object apart.

"…can continue fighting! The Baby Magnum is our only Object still functioning!!"

"No way…"

The princess's survival most likely had nothing to do with her own skill.

She had simply been chosen last.

The attack had only lasted for a few dozen seconds and it had died out before reaching her.

Once it was fired again, she would be vaporized along with her metal machine.

"What do we do? What do we do, Quenser!? It'll have the next one charged in only a few dozen seconds! What's going to happen then!?"

The Information Alliance's "oh ho ho" could fire along a line using her continuous beam Gatling gun, but her range was short.

The closer one was to the cannon being fired, the easier it was to avoid the attack by moving around it. But when it was pulled off at the extreme long range of ten kilometers, the speed and distance needed to evade increased dramatically.

Imagine a fan shape.

The distance to the side of the fan was not far at the base, but the closer one got to the upper edge, the greater that distance grew .

However, a future designer like Quenser saw another threat on top of that.

"The real problem isn't the destructive power."

He gulped.

An unpleasant sweat covered his brow, but he did not have time to worry about it.

"Objects can avoid laser weapons that move at the speed of light by predicting when they will be fired by monitoring the minute movements of the cannons and the targeting lenses. But this main cannon directly bends electron beams in midair to accelerate them via centrifugal force. There's no hint to when it will be fired. You can only start evading once the actual beam has been fired!!"

"No one can do that!!"

"That's why they were destroyed! Currently, no Object can evade its main cannon. None of our attacks can hit and all of its will. The MIB have created a single system that does that!!"

Only silence came from the radio.

The Information Alliance officer had either decided to withdraw or had no time to worry about Quenser's group.

It did not matter which it was.

Quenser wiped his cheek to get rid of a liquid that might have been sweat or tears.

"Heivia, let's find a way out of this on our own."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's find a way of defeating that goddamn Object before it fires again. If we don't, the princess will be blown to pieces!!"

"Screw that!! You can go be pretend to be a hero on your own. That thing destroyed three cutting-edge Objects in an instant. It was outnumbered, but it didn't matter! It might even be able to destroy all twenty Objects on the continent!! This isn't something flesh-and-blood humans can handle!!"

"She's our final hope. If the Baby Magnum gives up, who will retrieve us from the battlefield!?"

A disturbing noise came from Heivia's throat.

If the Baby Magnum was destroyed, there would be no one left to save them. Of all the Objects belonging to the Legitimacy Kingdom or the coalition, no one else would risk losing those massively expensive machines. Even if the MIB would eventually exterminate them, they would decide to watch from afar, analyze the situation, and try to find a way of winning in the long run.

Meanwhile, the MIB's Object would continue its arrogant rampage and the first victims would be Quenser's group.

"If you want to live, we have to continue forward," said Quenser calmly. "We need to at least find a way to let the princess accomplish something here. Otherwise, we'll be the soldiers who never returned in some tragic news story."

Part 13

As Quenser and the others hid at ground zero while sweating and almost wetting themselves, an armored vehicle with lots of antennae attached was parked behind some rocks about fifteen kilometers away. It was a commanding officer's VIP vehicle.

Those special vehicles practically announced that someone important was inside, so they rarely operated on their own.

And the same should have gone for the Information Alliance lieutenant colonel inside.

"I don't like it," quietly said Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

She was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl of about twelve, so the uniform of a high military officer that she wore impeccably and the number of medals on her chest seemed out of place. She was well known for using her army boots to kick anyone who jokingly mentioned the tradition of Shichi-Go-San from a certain island nation.

Inside the armored vehicle, she sat atop a sofa bed with her legs crossed. The vehicle was quite large because they would normally carry a large number of infantry, but this officer had it filled with the equipment she needed to relax: a refrigerator, a sofa bed, a dart

board, a simple shower, a secret satellite internet line not connected to the military network, a laptop, and a home theater screen that took up one entire wall.

"I don't like it."

"The Cannon 256 was destroyed, but the pilot Elite managed to eject. We had a later model from the same line prepared, so the overall situation should not change much."

These flowing words came from a young man in his late twenties.

He was always waiting behind the girl while she travelled across the battlefield. His rank was second lieutenant, but he looked more like a skilled secretary than a highly-trained killing machine. He was well known for immediately sending a punch toward anyone who mentioned that a certain country had once been filled with people who rejoiced at having an overbearing tsundere call them a dog.

Together, they were known as the "stopgap grim reaper".

When a military officer committed a scandal, these two were sent in to swiftly bring that officer's battalion back into battle. In this case, the Cannon 256's maintenance battalion had apparently been involved in human trafficking within Oceania. For that reason, the two of them had little attachment to the Cannon 256. In fact, they had never once cared all that much for the soldiers under their command.

Wraith waved a hand in annoyance.

"Not what I meant. I don't like what they're claiming."

"What the MIB are claiming?"

"They're making the announcement around the world. They hit the top of every video site's rankings a while ago, but this is different. I think they're panicking a bit because the Oceanian people's emotions have taken an unexpected turn."

She took a sip from the soda can on the side table and displayed the screen of her laptop on the home theater screen.

This is what it said:

"By reducing the amount of thick onion armor which is an Object's most unique feature, the cost can be reduced by five billion dollars."

"The durability of the armor is of little importance. We have overturned what everyone thought they knew about Objects by introducing a new system which can distort any attack."

【アーリーステイツ】
EARLY STATES

全長…70メートル

最高速度…時速530キロ

装甲…フライバイコライダー近接防御システム

用途…大陸用戦略防衛兵器

分類…陸戦専用第二世代

運用者…［MIB］

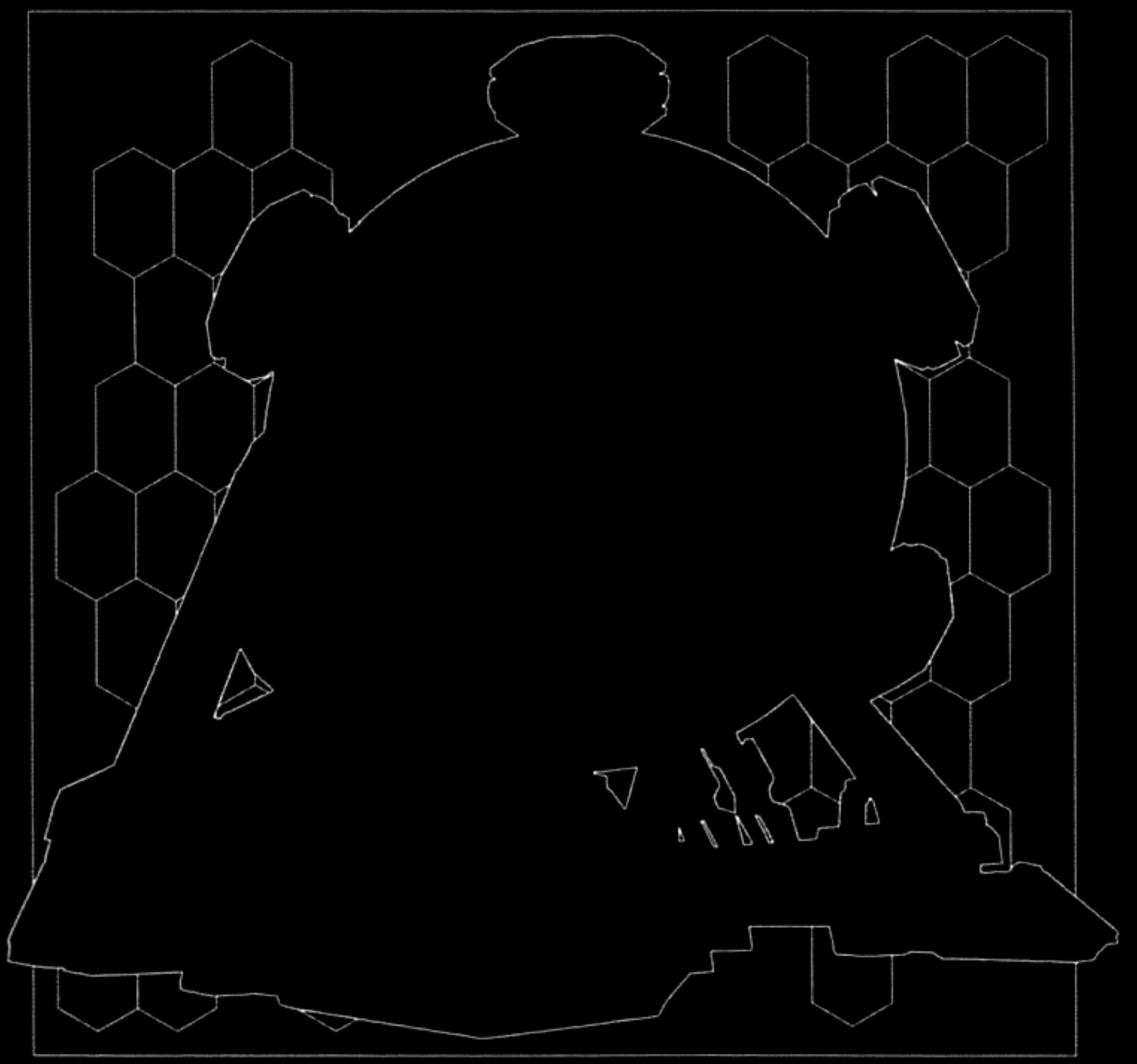
仕様…静電気式推進装置

主砲…フライバイコライダー誘導式電子ビーム砲

副砲…なし（主砲の出力調整で対応）

コードネーム…アーリーステイツ（かつてあった大国の復古を目指す思想から）

メインカラーリング…灰色



EARLY STATES

"This is the Flyby Collider."

"This technology eliminates the need for repeated extreme evasive actions, so a specially selected and developed pilot Elite is no longer needed."

"The selection, development, and protection of the Elite traditionally accounts for one-tenth of an Object's cost, but we have reduced that to zero."

"We will prove in Oceania that this is enough to win."

"Our Early States will destroy any Object that opposes it while using a normal soldier rather than an Elite. If you think you can win, then try to destroy it, coalition. We will equally destroy everyone that wishes to preserve this era and then celebrate the arrival of a new era."

"We will destroy the giant hand holding down all normal soldiers. This is a day to remember. We will regain equal possibilities for all of mankind and use that equality to produce fair competition."

"Whenever someone rises up, someone else is pushed down."

"Now, what will everyone do? How long will you be fooled into thinking a lifetime of being trampled on and squeezed dry is one of 'stability'?"

"Before you grow sick of it all and press a gun against your head, try standing up on your own two feet."

"Do not curl up on the edge of this horribly twisted world. Stand tall and walk boldly forward. We will achieve the victory needed for that. Come stand in the center of the world along with the night sky flag!!"

The young man smoothly tilted his head.

He mentally searched for the response his commander would most want to hear.

It did not matter what he himself thought.

"They are bluffing."

"Of course they are," spat back Wraith.

She was so irritated that she began spinning a ballpoint pen in her hand.

She was lost in thought.

(The Oceanian people are leaning toward the apes in the Legitimacy Kingdom. Even so, this much destructive power could frighten some of them into siding with the MIB. This is a conflict between emotions and interests. If the scales tilt in one direction, those idiots and their uncontrollable weapon could be invited into Oceania as heroes.)

"Mh…"

When she noticed her subconscious habit, she threw the pen away.

Spinning a pen was a mental stabilization action driven into her during the genius girl project she had gone through. There were thousands of girls with the exact same habit.

The fact that there were replacements for her had driven the girl toward bold actions. By grasping all of the dangerous opportunities that no one wanted to reach for, she had quickly risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel. However, it was not unusual for a sense of superiority and an inferiority complex to go hand in hand.

The young man achieved his stable position by possessing the flexibility to accept oppression (yet he would grow angry the instant someone pointed it out), so he picked up the pen without changing his expression.

The girl officer pouted her lips and spoke to the young man.

"It doesn't really matter if it's a bluff, second lieutenant. What matters is how many people will believe it. You need to learn how the Information Alliance does things."

Froleytia Capistrano, base commander of the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, was also frowning in displeasure.

"We will exterminate each and every one of our enemies, but we will fully support any who help bring about our new world."

"Specifically, we will supply you with this brand new technology."

"In wars and any other form of competition, whoever is fastest wins. The first condition is that you possess the intelligence gathering and management ability to locate and contact us. We are always waiting for some close friends."

A young female operator cautiously spoke to Froleytia.

"Wh-what should we do? We might be able to identify who posted the video…"

"Leave that to the deskwork groups who have nothing better to do back in safe country bases. I just hope they don't make any strange deals in the hope of acquiring technology."

She had no way of knowing, but that was another side of the world police.

Simply wielding a great power would only make one a feared dictator.

To be accepted by the world at large, one had to supply a great merit that made up for the risk.

"Were they originally connected to some country's intelligence agency? I see parts of their text that is meant to work up people's emotions. …I hope the monkey-brained higher ups can see that much."

The information itself had been spread across the normal internet, so anyone could easily read it.

"We will rebuild the former world police here in Oceania."

"We will bring order back to the world and fix this twisted era in which war has become constant."

"We do not insist that you participate in this."

"The world police will not hesitate or hold back when it comes to protecting the innocent people of the world. We wish to make that system very clear."

"Listen carefully. All good people can simply rejoice at the coming age while all evil people should tremble and await its arrival. No matter what anyone might think, we of the MIB will once more release the world police and then take back our former name."

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance officers who were separated by a great distance muttered the exact some words:

"I don't like it. How about I rub some mud on your face?"

Part 14

"Heivia, what should we call that thing? In fact, who decides on an Object's name?"

"How should I know!? Why should we give any real thought to that annoying bloodbath weapon? Let's just call it the Son of a Bitch!!"

Quenser, Heivia, and the others had crawled under the remains of a train. They did not know if the enemy had located them or not , but when faced with attacks even Objects could not avoid, they wanted to hide no matter how useless it was. Once they were targeted, they could not escape on foot.

"Something about this is bothering me."

"What a coincidence! I was just wondering why a group of guys has to cram themselves into such a small space. Quenser, why aren 't you a beautiful girl!?"

"Railguns and coilguns are metal shells, lasers are light, and it worked on plasma and ion as well. Is there really a technology that allows them to bend all of those? And if they were using something like that, why can we see the Son of a Bitch in front of us?"

"What? …Come to think of it, you're right. If it was constantly bending all light, it might appear and disappear like a mirage."

"There isn't some invisible wall evenly diverting all incoming attacks. It uses something else."

Also, the MIB's Son of a Bitch had remained motionless the entire time. It may have simply felt there was no need to evade.

However, that in itself was odd.

"After it destroyed the terminal facility from the inside, it sat there doing nothing for a while. Why? Was it waiting for the dust to clear up? Or did it need to boot up its mystery offense and defense system."

While lying on the ground, Quenser increased the magnification of his binoculars and observed around the MIB's Son of a Bitch.

Rubble had scattered about from the destruction of the terminal facility that the Object had been built inside. He saw boulder-like pieces of concrete, hunks of metal that had lost their original shape , and crushed plastic boxes.

But they all had one point in common.

"They're all melted?"

"That thing's been sending electron beams around it to accelerate them. That has to create a huge amount of energy. …But shit. That means the energy it's releasing is enough to melt

concrete. If one of those hits us, we'll truly vanish from the face of the earth!!"

"…"

Quenser pointed his binoculars in several different directions.

He quickly found what he was looking for.

A beer bottle was mixed in with the rubble. It had likely been brought in by a member of the MIB.

The brown bottle was broken down the middle and the jagged edge glittered sharply.

"No, wait…"

"What is it, Quenser? Wait a second! Why are you crawling out from under the train!?"

"The Information Alliance's first attack was a huge metal shell. It was forced off track and hit the ground instead of the Son of a Bitch. That's the best piece of evidence. If I'm right, there should be traces left there."

"You're kidding. We don't need to go on a walk right now!! Sure, our odds of survival if we hide are almost zero, but… Dammit, Quenser! Wait up!!"

Either way, it was all over once the MIB's Son of a Bitch began attacking the Baby Magnum which was observing from afar without knowing what to do.

No one would try to rescue Quenser's group which was isolated on the front lines.

They would either be killed by a giant hunk of metal or die of thirst in the desert.

Either way, a happy ending did not await them.

After crawling out from under the train, they circled around as far from the Son of a Bitch as they could while moving to where the shell had landed. The scattered rubble of the terminal facility acted as cover. They continued on while pressing their backs against chunks of concrete larger than cars.

"We're gonna die. We're definitely gonna die. The biggest mistake of my life was meeting someone with a death wish like you."

"It's called going for broke, Heivia. If you don't see adversity as an opportunity, you'll never make it anywhere in this shitty world."

"Yeah, but an opportunity for who!? No matter how much I work, the son of the famous Winchell family will be ignored and some black-hearted fat ass will take all the credit. And yet I came to the battlefield so that position could be mine!!"

Even as impatience and tension shortened their lifespans, they made their way through the rubble and toward the metal shell. Their throats were oddly dry and the air stung them, so their water bottles quickly grew empty.

Their path took a C-shape as they avoided the Son of a Bitch.

About three hundred meters behind the enemy Object was a crater with a radius of thirty meters.

"There it is. We found it."

"Seriously? You're climbing down? That thing flew at Mach who-even-knows. The friction might have heated it enough to light your hand on fire the instant you touch it. Ah, wait! Are you even listening!?"

"…"

Quenser ignored Heivia. Or rather, his curiosity won out and he did not even hear the other boy. He slid down to the center of the crater and the helicopter pilot and the other middle-aged soldiers followed him.

Once he was left behind, Heivia clicked his tongue and started down into the crater.

They found the metal shell.

It was larger than the average passenger vehicle, but its shape was not all that different from the squashed bullets commonly seen at shooting ranges. It had likely originally been a cylinder with one end tapered off like a stake, but the front half was crushed into a round shape while the back half retained its form. It looked like a distorted umbrella.

"What is this? It looks like more than just a hunk of metal."

"It's one of the Catapult Cargo's container-style shells. That Object can put whatever it wants inside. It can use a powerful acid spray to dissolve an Object's armor, it can use a low-stability plasma cannon's gas and a large scale battery, or it can use a COIL combination."

"This thing really is dangerous! Was it a dud!? If it goes off now , not even our bones will be left behind!"

But that was not the important part.

Quenser looked at the rear half of the shell.

Specifically, he focused on the damage to the side.

"I was right. It has some odd damage. That caused it to lose its balance and veer off course. It was a deviation in air resistance."

"What? You mean the Son of a Bitch didn't do anything to this shell and it was just a design error on the Information Alliance's part?"

"It doesn't appear to be that simple." Quenser gave a bitter look . "If the Son of a Bitch has the technology to accurately and systematically cause damage to shells in midair, it would be able to intentionally send metal shells off course."

"Are you serious? Objects do usually have laser weapons to defend against ballistic missiles, but are you saying it can precisely alter shells flying toward it!?"

However, Quenser rejected that possibility.

But not in a good way.

"This is something simpler and more dangerous."

"…?"

"The concrete scattered around the Son of a Bitch had melted. Same with the metal, the plastic, and everything else. But that wasn't because of the residual energy of the electron beams. The one thing that wasn't melted was a glass bottle. Even the sharp broken edges were fully intact."

"What are you trying to-… Wait. You don't mean…!?"

"It was acid," spat out Quenser. "The Son of a Bitch is scattering a bunch of acid mist around itself! Just by entering the acid zone, the shells are damaged enough to veer off course. The laser beam weapons and the like are turned aside using that mist like a mirage !!"

"Wait. That doesn't make any sense, you idiot!! Object armor is essentially steel made to resist high heat. If it was scattering acid everywhere, it would melt its own armor. And what about its main cannon? Its electron beams aren't being randomly bent. It's accurately and precisely controlling them to emulate a particle accelerator! How do you explain that with your acid theory!?"

"The acid particles are probably encased in a capsule that's just slightly bigger. Those small capsules are what make up the mist. If

they can control the density and friction, they might be able to electrically control the plasma and electron beams as well." Quenser sounded as disgusted by the idea as Heivia. "Heivia, remember the medical nanotech I mentioned in relation to the Blue Cross? This probably uses that. The acid is wrapped in a safe outer shell and made to remain in the air as a colloid, but a signal sent at the necessary timing causes the outer shell to pop like a bubble. Once the acid inside touches the air, it rapidly vaporizes. That lets them control the location and density of the acid reacting to the air. It wouldn't be difficult to build an accurate device like a particle accelerator."

"That theory is insane…"

"After the Son of a Bitch destroyed the terminal facility and revealed itself, it just sat there for a while. Why? Because it takes time to disperse its acid armor around itself to set up its invincible shield!!"

"But if that's the answer, we're in trouble!" wailed Heivia while ignoring all logic. His words came straight from his exposed emotions. "You're saying the Son of a Bitch uses a bunch of acid? You're saying it has scattered a chemical that can melt through metal and concrete on contact!? We don't have any equipment to handle chemical weapons! If they destroy the environment like this, there's nothing we can do! This is just like the acid bomb! We' ll be melted down to our bones!! I don't want that!!"

"Don't worry. It's okay! Think back to the Son of a Bitch's main cannon. The rings from its electron beams only reached two hundred meters, remember? That must be the edge of its range. If

we stay that far away, we don't have to worry about the acid armor being activated around us. Any further than that and the remote control of the outer shells won't work!!"

"You can't know that! The wind could send the acid toward us after it bursts from the capsule. Or maybe the Son of a Bitch is holding some of its power in reserve!! No one can say where the safe line is. Oh, no. I drank all my water because I was oddly thirsty. Don't tell me…"

Falling victim to self-made fear and imaginings severely reduced one's chance of surviving on the battlefield. A sharp eye for even the smallest hint could lead to imagined dangers if one took it too far.

"Heivia! No matter how bad the situation is, you can't overcome it if you don't accept it! Why did the metal and concrete melt but the glass didn't? This wouldn't happen with just heat. You may not want to accept that nanotech is being used without a microscope to check on it, but the Son of a Bitch clearly has some means of freely controlling the acid! And the nanotech capsules is the only theory I have for how they can spread an acid mist and freely switch it on and off!! Heivia, do you have any other ideas!? Well, do you!? Yes or no!?"

"God damn you…"

"That isn't what I asked! Yes or no!?"

"No, you idiot!! I admit it. You may be insane and forget about the danger when faced with an Object, but I admit that insanity

gives you a sort of cleverness!! So what do we do now, future mad scientist? Let's say it is using nanotech. Let's say the area two hundred meters around it is filled with acid capsules. What can we do!? It can melt metal shells fired at Mach 4 or 5!! We can't even get close!!"

"True."

Quenser looked up from the bottom of the crater and toward the Son of a Bitch that towered up amid the rubble.

And he thought while aware that their survival relied on their next actions.

"I noticed something odd in the moment just before it fired its main cannon."

"What?"

"It almost entirely surrounded itself with the electron beam rings, remember? The afterimage made it look like a giant dome. It has to release the acid to bend its own beams, so it had to have been almost entirely surrounded in an acid mist."

"What about it?"

"If it bends both light and the electron beams, how does it target so accurately? Even infrared and radar would be distorted as it passes through the acid armor."

"Wait. Are you saying it has a separate targeting system!? Infantry, a UAV, a satellite, or anything really. It just needs some kind of external eyes linked to it!!"

"It might have a targeting lens attached to a tentacle-like cable that directly connects back to it." Quenser slowly focused his mind and calmed his breathing. "Whatever it is, we don't have to worry about its powerful main cannon as long as we destroy that 'eye'. The princess's attacks still won't reach it, but it will at least eliminate the threat of instant destruction. We'll have more time to think!!"

"Thinking is your job. Give me something to actually do! If I keep worrying over this, I'm going to go crazy with fear!!"

"Okay, Heivia. It's time to search. We need to do a thorough search for a camera, a sensor, a radar, or anything else that can be used to target. This is no different from when enter your first love' s room and she leaves to make some tea."

"Um, Quenser… I don't quite follow."

"Eh? Really? Doesn't it make you restless!? Don't back away now!! Wait, the helicopter pilot is looking away too!? And everyone else!? Was that really such a weird thing to say!?"

Either way, the Son of a Bitch's invincible defense system would not last forever. If a metal shell was coated with reinforced glass or pure gold, it might pierce through the acid armor without interference.

But they did not have time to implement any such theories.

For the moment, they needed to take the initiative in whatever way they could.

"I-I'm not suggesting anything perverted like looking around for her underwear or tampons. I just meant looking at the bookshelf to see what she reads! Everyone does that, right!?"

"We get it! We can argue about this all night once we get back alive, so stop clinging to me with those bloodshot eyes! Also, a bloodline-focused noble can't get into a girl's bedroom so easily!!"

They used their binoculars, rifle scopes, and the other sensors on their weapons to silently scan the area.

The time it took wore at their nerves.

"There's nothing. Nothing at all! There are a few pieces of scrap metal lying around, but nothing is giving off an electromagnetic or infrared signal. Or are they sticking to passive sensors!?"

An active sensor would send out infrared rays or ultrasonic waves and measure the reflection, but passive sensors would only detect the light and sound that came to them naturally. The latter type sent out nothing themselves, so they were less sensitive but harder to detect.

"There has to be something. The Son of a Bitch can't target accurately while surrounded by that acid armor that bends light and warps objects!"

"How long has it been since it fired? Shouldn't the princess have arrived by now!?"

"Wait, look over there! Something's shining in a gap in the rubble. Is it a lens!?"

"My sensors aren't picking anything up."

"It might be a passive sensor like a digital camera. Either way, it won't hurt to check it out!!"

Instead of heading directly toward it, they once again cautiously circled around in a large C-shape. If it was what they were looking for, the glass lens was the Son of a Bitch's eye. If they were detected, they would be attacked by that electron beam cannon that easily melted through Objects.

Approaching it wore at their nerves more than handling a landmine or unexploded ordnance.

"Oh, this reminds me of the teapot."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I was at school in my safe country, I had a hands-on lesson in handling manufactured metals and explosives. To disarm an unexploded plastic explosive, we used hot water to melt the explosive."

"Say something ominous like that again and I'm throwing you in front of the lens."

They were checking to see if this was a sensor or lens, but they could not simply look at it from the front. They would be killed once it caught sight of them.

And so they circled around to the side and back of the rubble it was hiding under and began to search for a cable.

"This is no different from searching for a landmine. Stab your knife blade shallowly into the sand to check for something underneath."

"Wouldn't you use your rifle's sensors to search for mines?"

"Not in all this rubble. There's too much metal to trust a positive reading."

"Just like oil pipelines have sensors to detect oil leaking out, the cable might be covered in sensors, so don't damage it. If you find it , don't pull it out. If it has gyro sensors, it might react to a slight change in tilt."

The helicopter pilot and middle-aged soldiers helped Quenser and Heivia slowly search through the sand. With sweat covering their faces, they stuck their sharp blades into the soft sand and searched along millimeter by millimeter.

"Isn't there a toy from that island nation that's a lot like this? You stick toy knives in the side of a barrel and the pirate inside pops out."

"When he pops out, does it mean you win or lose?"

"If it happens here, we'll all be turned to ash, so it isn't funny at all. The pressure is on an entirely different level."

Suddenly, the helicopter pilot formed a twisted smile after finding something with the broken piece of rebar he was sticking into the sand.

"There's something here! It's long, skinny, and it bent a bit."

"Wait, don't move. I'll check with my knife."

Heivia slowly walked over to the pilot, stuck his knife in from a different angle, and made a displeased look of his own.

His expression was that of someone who had opened a door and saw a grenade fall to the floor after being activated by the turning doorknob. Rather than pure fear, it was the oddly relaxed expression of someone trying to look away from reality.

"Dammit. There is something here. It's a long narrow tube of some sort."

"It travels from the pilot to you, so let's try slowly removing the sand in between."

Quenser and the others carefully removed the sand like they were excavating some ruins. A few centimeters below the surface, they found something that resembled a snake. They had expected to find it, but it still squeezed at their hearts to see it.

However…

"Hey, Quenser. What is this thing?"

"Can't you tell?"

"It just looks like a rubber hose to me!!" shouted Heivia now that his tension was gone and the dam of his emotions burst.

He circled around the pile of rubble and did not hesitate to reach for the location of the supposed lens.

He tossed something over.

It was the bottom half of a broken glass bottle.

"There was never a wired sensor or lens here! There's nothing to help us here. What do we do now!? Is there really any way of keeping the Son of a Bitch from firing!?"

"Wait. In that case, how does it get targeting information? The acid mist filling the air around it bends laser beams and electron beams. Any sensors inside the shield will pick up distorted readings because…"

Quenser trailed off.

Heivia had been criticizing him, but it bothered him when Quenser stopped speaking mid-sentence. He frantically spoke up.

"What is it? Did you have an idea!?"

"It can freely bend even light," blankly muttered Quenser. " That means it might be able to repeatedly bend the light it wants

like a periscope. It doesn't need a cable. What if it can use the acid mist in the place of an optical fiber?"

"You have got to be kidding," cut in Heivia as if saying he did not want to hear any more. "That would mean the Son of a Bitch truly has no weaknesses. That means it can achieve offense, defense, and targeting all with that acid mist!! What can we possibly do!?"

"…"

"Please… Please don't fall silent!! Thinking up ways to resolve this is your job! If you're silent, there's nothing we can do. Please come up with some crazy idea!!"

They heard a low rumbling noise.

What looked like the rings of Saturn colored bluish-white appeared around the Son of a Bitch.

"Not good. That's the MIB's main cannon," said the helicopter pilot while forgetting to blink. "Is it targeting the Baby Magnum or us!? Either way, all hope of survival is gone as soon as it fires!!"

"We need something…anything! Is there any more information that might help us find a way out of this!?"

"Of course there isn't," said a middle-aged soldier in a dejected tone. He had a blank look in his eyes. "What will looking around tell us? There's nothing but piles of rubble and an overwhelmingly powerful Object. What can we find with our radios and handheld

devices? We'll only find the announcement the MIB are sending over the internet."

But that caused Quenser to frown.

"Announcement?"

"They're triumphantly proclaiming their victory to the world! They have to be pretty confident of their victory. There's no way we can defeat this Object!!"

Quenser stared at the screen of the handheld device the man held out.

The MIB. The ghosts of a former superpower. No need for onion armor. A normal soldier instead of a specialized pilot Elite. Drastically reduced costs. A new defense system known as the Flyby Collider. The geographical requirements for the world police . The creation of a new superpower and the construction of a peaceful world by having a single military rule. A battle with existing Objects to proclaim the coming of a new age. The Early States.

"Hey, Heivia."

"What?"

"The container-style shells fired by the Catapult Cargo should be located around here. Those never went off. If we swap out the fuse, we can detonate them, right?"

"So what if we can!?" asked Heivia in an irritated voice.

"We might be able to win," said Quenser before he had finished .

A silence fell as the others held their breaths.

Quenser repeated himself.

"We might be able to defeat that goddamn Son of a Bitch. Do you want in on this gamble?"

Part 15

Fortunately, Quenser and Heivia were not alone. With the helicopter pilot and other soldiers sharing their fate, they had a total of about eight people.

They had no time.

More and more bluish-white rings were appearing around the Son of a Bitch. They surrounded the Object like a glowing cocoon. Once it accelerated enough, it would release a long and continuous electron beam to sweep across like the stroke of a pen. The Baby Magnum would be unable to escape and Quenser's group had no chance at all. The fate of the target would be sealed.

And so Quenser gave quick instructions.

He pulled out several pen-like electric fuses and handed them out to the soldiers.

"Everyone, pry open the Catapult Cargo's container-style shells which landed around this area. Swap out the fuses with these! Once you're done, escape outside the blast range of the shell. I don't know when exactly this will begin and I don't have time to wait! If you don't want to be blown to pieces, protect your own life yourself!"

"What about me, Quenser!?"

"Use your radio to perform a random search of frequencies. Find one that will reach that Son of a Bitch's cockpit. Anywhere with an unnatural amount of noise should be on the band they're using!"

"You're kidding, right? Are you really going to communicate with it!? Once it traces the source of the signal, it'll blow you away!"

"That's why I'll route it through several radios so the source can't be determined. The electric fuses can receive and transmit radio signals and I'll be using all of your radios as well. Just scatter them over a wide area!"

"What will you do?"

"Make some rockets," spat out Quenser. "I want to make a few giant rocket fireworks like we did before. I need to borrow every single rifle bullet all of you have! Also your water bottles and cooling spray. You won't need them if you die, right?"

"What? Why do you need water for a rocket?"

"The rocket is just a vehicle. It's what the rocket is carrying that matters. Anyway, just do as I say. This is the only way to fight back!"

It was a race against time.

They quickly scattered and began their work.

As seen in gun malfunctions, the explosive within rifle bullets could easily kill their owner if handled incorrectly. However, Quenser was an explosives specialist. Even without an electronic scale and specialized tools, he accurately and precisely repacked the explosive with the equipment on hand. Fortunately, the area was covered in rubble, so he was able to procure the containers and stabilizing rods he needed.

The worst part was the fuse.

As he twisted tissues into a string, he mixed in a small amount of explosive. If he did not add in enough, the flame would die out, but too much would cause it to explode partway through. Adding it in evenly required the most careful attention.

"I've swapped out the fuse in the shell. After this transmission, I 'll throw away my radio!"

"I'm done, too. I'm just going to run away now!!"

"You'll be using my radio as a decoy, so I won't be able to contact you. It doesn't mean I'm dead, so don't forget to pick me up afterwards!"

Quenser monitored the progress from the radio in his hand.

He then heard Heivia shout his way.

“I found the frequency! It’s 10.1 GHz. Are you really going to contact the Son of a Bitch!?”

“We can’t win if I don’t. Anyway, you go hide somewhere safe! ”

“And where would that be!? Not even a nuclear shelter can protect you from that thing!”

Quenser could not spend any more time waiting.

The handmade rocket fireworks were the size of a 1.5 liter bottle . He stuck them into the ground, carefully adjusted the angle, and lit the fuses.

With an explosive roar, the rockets flew diagonally up toward the Son of a Bitch.

Before arriving, they veered off course.

“What are you doing!? They’ve gone off course and those toys can’t even scratch an Object!!”

“They don’t have to hit!!”

Quenser’s strange comment was immediately followed by the rockets reaching their limit above the Son of a Bitch.

They burst and scattered their contents everywhere.

Part 16

In that instant, a young man of the MIB known as D.C. 0 frowned a bit within the cockpit of the Object officially known as the Early States and that Quenser and the others had been calling the Son of a Bitch.

A large number of errors had just appeared on the screen.

The Early States had no onion armor, and its only means of offense and defense, the Flyby Collider, had become unusable. Control had been lost of the electron beam being accelerated and it had flown off into the distant desert without reaching its full power.

"What? It's frozen over? Was it those rockets? Did they create a thin layer of ice to seal the ejection points for the nanotech capsules !?"

It seemed those had been more than simple toys made with gunpowder.

They had scattered water above the Early States and then instantly froze it. The MIB man initially thought of coolant, but then he came up with a much simpler answer.

(It was just cooling spray and water bottles, wasn't it? Such a childish trick, yet it has temporarily stopped the Flyby Collider!!)

Some static came from his radio.

Someone was cutting in on the band used by the MIB. It was not encrypted, so it arrived in the cockpit as a voice.

"Hi there, MIB. Did that surprise you a bit? I know your special weapon uses nanotech acid capsules. And to efficiently spray them out, you would do so from the top of the Object. I thought a thin but wide layer of ice would seal up all of them. Was I right?"

"You idiot," muttered the young man while pressing a few buttons with his index finger.

He tried to scan for the source of the radio signal, but he detected quite a few. And the Early States only had its main cannon, so it could not attack all of them at once with secondary cannons.

"Did you really think you could stop the Early States with such a childish trick? To create our new superpower, we have been secretly planning this since before the Oceanian military nation was even formed! It will never lose to a trick you thought up on the spot!!"

There was a slight humming noise as if from a bug zapper powering on.

Normally, the electron beam weapon which acted as the Early States' main cannon would achieve its maximum power by accelerating in rings with the help of the Flyby Collider, but it provided plenty of heat even without the acceleration.

The ice had been meant to cover a large area, so it was only a few millimeters thick. Even if the weakened cannon would not function as a weapon, it could melt the ice.

And once it was melted, the Flyby Collider could activate once more.

The perfect armament for offense and defense would return.

"Ha ha ha!! We still have two more Early States equipped with Flyby Colliders. You have no idea where they are, do you? And we won't give you the time to find out. This one Object can buy enough time for them to be activated. After that, the difference in strength will only continue to grow!!"

"Is that so?"

"And in addition to the Objects, we have hundreds of amplification facilities. Since you temporarily sealed off the Flyby Collider, can you guess what those do? They scatter the nanotech across the entire continent. The Flyby Collider will cover the continent and the three Early States will control it!! You know what that means, don't you!?"

"You will be able to freely bend those high-output electron beams over the entire continent and send long-distance attacks against our Objects from any direction. The horizon will no longer be a restriction. But did you forget about attenuation in the air?"

"This is nanotech. By regulating the location and amounts of the acid, a space similar to a vacuum can be created. Like a whirlwind,

it will be incredibly short lived and only exist in an exceedingly small area, but we have the technology needed to accurately pass the electron beam through that narrow tube!! In other words, we can almost entirely ignore attenuation!!"

"I see. And as the 'flyby' in the name suggests, I suppose you can greatly increase the output by passing the electron beam between each Son of a Bitch and reaccelerating it. What a convenient age we live in. This wonderful tech lets you overturn the simple differences between Objects. …And in exchange, acid will eat into over half the continent."

It was similar to expanding the current local conditions over the entire continent of Oceania.

None of the Objects in range would be able to hit with their attacks and the Early States would be able to destroy any enemy by freely bending their electron beams.

It was not a long, drawn-out battle or one-on-one fight based on an implicit understanding.

They were assuming zero losses on their part.

The completely unilateral destruction would lead to all the losses being on the other side.

"The smallest system is used to rule the largest area! This is the perfect system for the new world police!! Once we succeed in Oceania, we need only expand the range bit by bit. In less than a decade, this new system will cover the entire surface of the earth.

And Oceania will be at the center. Anyone who cannot keep up will be swallowed up by the new era and die!!"

"Do you really think you'll have time for that?" mocked the enemy soldier over the radio.

But the young man's gaze did not waver.

"Are you referring to the first generation Object waiting in the distance? It will not make it in time. This ice is only a few millimeters thick. In less than ten seconds, control of the Flyby Collider will-…"

"That isn't what I meant."

That declaration was immediately followed by a great roar and vibration passing through the thick sides of the Object. The noise assaulted the young man's eardrums.

"What!?"

"Did you forget about the Catapult Cargo's unexploded ordnance? Those are the true main weapons of an Object. What do you think is inside them? The gas for a low-stability plasma cannon? A battery filled with power taken directly from the Object 's reactor? Or maybe a COIL set? Well, it doesn't matter what. It will all damage you just the same," said the enemy soldier. "After all, you eliminated the expensive craftsman-made onion armor because you could rely on your Flyby Collider. Without that defense system, you only have armor which is inferior to the average Object."

"…!!"

(Did they swap out the fuses so they could use them!?)

The young man in black looked around the cockpit once more.

There were over ten levers and hundreds of buttons. Those controls would normally be used in conjunction with a system that read eyeball movements with a laser, but he could not use that very well without the training of a pilot Elite.

Yes.

He was not a pilot Elite.

Destroying the existing style of Object with a normal soldier had held ideological meaning for them.

They would hold the most powerful position by deploying large numbers of cheap yet effective weapons.

That was their first step toward being the same as that ideal nation that had once existed.

"You aren't an Elite! The reason you've just been sitting there wasn't because disseminating the acid capsules took time. You didn't understand the extremely complex piloting system, so a high-speed battle was out of the question for you!! You planned to remain motionless and crush any Object that approached. It makes for a nice performance, but that was your only option!! And that means one thing!!"

He could not avoid the large explosions bursting up from the ground.

If those tremendous explosions produced by the infantrymen reached the Early States before the thin ice melted, its inferior armor would be destroyed.

"Kh…"

The young man in black reached his hands toward two of the many levers.

He grabbed them.

And he pushed them forcefully forward.

"You idiot!! We knew from the beginning a normal soldier would be piloting it! We have a way of letting the computer handle as much of the piloting process as possible. Even if it is not enough for a battle against another Object, I can still move this Object! I can even move at high speeds, so I will not be caught in your explosions!!"

An explosive noise burst out.

More than one burst out.

But these were not caused by the explosions the enemy soldier had caused.

They were the sounds of the recoil as the Object moved in a lightning-like zigzag to escape the explosions.

"I'll crush you."

The young man in black smiled.

The thin layer of ice covering a portion of the Early States had melted.

He had his main weapon back.

"I'll crush you!! I'll show you how irreverent it was to think that was enough to oppose the MIB and the return of the world police! I will crush you into a cruel symbol of what happens when someone opposes us!!"

Everything turned red.

The young man's intense anger caused his the color crimson to seep in from the edges of his vision.

And…

Part 17

"What are you doing?" blankly muttered Heivia. His voice quickly grew to a shout. "What in the hell are you doing!? Provoking him only made the Son of a Bitch move more quickly! This is no different from committing suicide by agitating the enemy!"

"No."

Quenser grinned.

They had no hope.

They would be smashed to pieces if the Son of a Bitch simply gave into its anger and charged forward, but he still smiled in assurance of his victory.

“We’ve won. He’s the one who's committing suicide.”

“What?”

“Objects are over fifty meters tall and weigh over twenty thousand tons. They’re as massive as two nuclear aircraft carriers, but they rule the battlefield while moving faster than five hundred kilometers per hour.” He paused to take a breath before continuing . “The inertial Gs felt by the pilot are much greater than those of a supersonic fighter. Those Gs are resisted with a special suit filled with cutting-edge technology and thoroughly altering the Elite’s body. And do you know what that means?”

“If a perfectly normal soldier is forced through those actions…”

Heivia gulped.

Quenser gave the answer with the cruelty of stabbing in a knife.

“If they’re lucky, not enough blood will reach their brain and they’ll black out. If not, a major blood vessel or organ could burst, killing them instantly.”

With a great rumbling noise, the Son of a Bitch moved off in an odd direction. It passed right by Quenser and the others. As it forced its way through the piles of rubble, it gently continued in just that one direction. That mindless action showed the one piloting the Object had lost control.

"You…gwah…aaaaaaahh!"

The voice coming from the radio seemed to be cursing them.

Quenser smiled and brought the device to his mouth.

"What's wrong? Did the capillaries in your eyes burst? You sound like you're having trouble because your entire vision is being dyed red."

"You…idiot…" The young man's voice was intermittent as if he was having trouble breathing. "This was…the last chance…to correct this world…that was broken like stained glass… The world desires…the return of its former police…. Do you…love war that much…?"

"Are you serious?" spat back Quenser. "The collapse of the UN symbolizes the destruction of the world map, but how many decades ago was that? At the very least, it was before the time of someone who sounds as young as you. The old maintenance woman is about the only person I know who is just barely old enough to have experienced it."

"Ah…gh…"

"You didn't know anything, did you? It was just easier to fool the people if you had some kind of historical background. For example, I could say I am a well-known noble and that I found some old documents related to an ancestor's sunken ship that disappeared in the stormy sea long ago. Then I would go on to ask you to help fund the mission to salvage any valuables. What you MIB did was similar to that."

It was possible the former world police had performed a useful role.

The age ruled by a superpower may have been much more peaceful than the modern age.

As a member of the younger generation, Quenser had no intention of denying something he knew nothing about.

However…

"Are you really the successors of that superpower?" spat out Quenser. "If you can say yes with a straight face, I'll clap my hands and laugh in your face."

At the very least, these MIB had no connection to the world police.

They were villains who were merely using that name in the distant future.

"I think you're mistaken about something. This isn't your country or a colony ruled by the Legitimacy Kingdom. This

country belongs to the people of Oceania and no one else!! We are merely intruding for the time being. As soon as you forget that simple fact and begin taking this land because you like it, you can't call yourselves police!! You're nothing but invaders who look up to a former ideal!!"

"Gh…gbh."

The sound of someone coughing up blood came over the radio.

But the Son of a Bitch still came to a stop.

It seemed that comment was something the young man could not overlook.

The movements of the Object grew more human.

"
Gbaaa

As if a thin thread had finally snapped, the Son of a Bitch came to a complete stop.

"That's pretty cruel." Heivia grinned bitterly. "You knew the more he moved at high speed the more damage would build up inside him, but you kept provoking him."

"What else could I do? I had no other way to attack him." Quenser shrugged and raised his middle finger. "I manipulated that bastard with my words. A perfect end for a conspirator, don't you think?"

Epilogue

"The operation to track down the MIB is still ongoing. We will meet any resistance with force. We will send photos to confirm their deaths, so please check them against the list."

"We are currently investigating the terminal facilities they used as bases. Surprisingly, we really did find two more Objects awaiting their final preparations. We also found over five hundred of the amplification facilities for the Flyby Collider. Given another twelve hours, they might have been able to release it all and bring war to the entirety of Oceania. Fortunately, we managed to defeat them before they could do so."

"A large number of MIB members have been found in an abandoned factory near Sydney. We are hoping they will surrender. Please prepare to hold them as prisoners of war."

"The night sky movement is calming down. We were warned it was a possibility, but I'm relieved it looks unlikely we will have to engage the civilians in combat."

Froleytia puffed on her long, narrow kiseru while listening to the reports in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's mission control room.

Her expression was no different from normal.

"Do you think we can bring this all to an end?"

"It's mostly over already. The Black Uniforms are likely handling the sponsors hidden in safe countries. It may have helped that we managed to secure the Objects before they were completely ready. If they could have run off, they might have disappeared into the darkness."

"Did that false hope lead the MIB personnel to be focused in those areas?"

"The Objects acted a lot like the…what do you call it? That sticky tape stuff you stick in the corner of the kitchen to catch roaches. Anyway, I'm glad we could bring an end to this chaos."

Froleytia thought for a moment and then spoke.

"That means there is one remaining problem."

"Yes, the one functioning MIB Object that Quenser and the others ran into. The Flyby Collider especially could cause conflict between the different world powers that want to get their hands on it."

"I would love to take it for ourselves, but I doubt it will be so easy. Acquiring the technology and monopolizing it are two different things."

Also, there was more than just the one Object. Even if they were incomplete, there were two Objects with reactors installed as well

as hundreds of the amplification facilities. If multiple world powers tried to take them for their own army, it could easily cause another war.

Also, if the technology to scatter acid over a target area spread around the world, it could dry up farmlands and have catastrophic consequences on mankind as a whole. It would be best to destroy it so the foolish military officials would not covet it.

If everyone began thinking they needed the technology to stand up against the others who had it, there would be no stopping it.

"If only the MIB had tried to prevent their technology from leaking out by rigging a system to detonate all the reactors and acid tanks when a signal was sent over the internet."

"Out of curiosity, would it be possible destroy everything they left behind and make it look like that was what happened?" asked Froleytia.

"If those are my orders, yes. But I wouldn't want the higher ups to know about it. If they found out I abandoned new technology and blew up a veritable treasure trove, they'd string me up."

"What if I was the one taking the risk?"

"Then give me the order. It is our duty to carry out your wishes."

After a quick command, Froleytia ended the transmission.

She brought the kiseru back into her mouth.

A young female operator looked up at her worriedly.

"Y-you do not look very happy."

"There is another problem," she muttered.

(We still don't know where the gold bars that funded the MIB were hidden.)

The predecessors of the MIB were said to have stolen a large number of gold bars during the collapse of the UN.

The upper levels of the military, the soldiers on the battlefield, and the captured members of the MIB had all dismissed it as an absurd illusion.

(But could they really maintain an organization of that size on nothing but a lie? I'm not about to say it's completely true, but surely they would have had to show some people a pile of gold bars as "proof" to get them to believe the lie.)

If the truthful portion of that absurd story came to light, it could cause a large problem.

The current system of currency was based on a market where all those gold bars did not exist.

What if enough gold bars to fill the ocean suddenly appeared all at once?

(The price of gold would plummet and the current system of currency could easily collapse.)

It was a frightening "bomb". It could cause a commotion on a level rivalling the collapse of the UN. But even if they interrogated all of the captured MIB members, it was unlikely any of them would say they knew where the gold was.

After thinking that far, Froleytia cracked her neck.

"That's a dangerous line of thinking. Was it by wielding this sort of 'reality' that they gained so much power? It's like a computer virus that eats into the human brain."

"?"

After the helicopter crash and the defeat of the Son of a Bitch, Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of their group hurried back to the maintenance base zone.

They had lost the ability to walk on their own, so a rescue team came to retrieve them.

The military vehicles were a wonderful sight when they drove up.

They cried tears of joy that they belonged to a unit filled with outdated old-style weapons.

"Ugh, this is horrible. I'm covered in sweat, sand, blood, oil, and I don't even know what else!! Hey, how many days of leave do I have left? Actually, do we even get any!?"

"Why would I know what your schedule is? I just want to take a shower and crawl into bed. I think I might be an idiot. I go to all that extra work on my own, but I still get paid the same as everyone else."

When the vehicle came to a stop, the two idiots rolled out the door. The sandy desert ground awaited them below. Getting fine sand all over the stains covering their bodies only made everything worse.

They did not have it in them to stand back up, so they began wriggling like exhausted worms. As they did, the old maintenance woman walked up.

"Oh, c'mon. Why couldn't we at least be greeted by the princess ?"

"That's because she's taking a post-battle shower," replied the old woman.

The two idiots immediately stood up and shouted in unison.

"That means it's time for our reward!!"

"You two can try to peep if you like, but you'll probably be shot in the name of protecting classified information."

The two idiots were not using their brains for anything worthwhile, so they did not listen.

The old maintenance woman stood before them. That was valuable information. That eliminated the possibility of the greatest trap where they peeped on the women's bath and found an old woman inside. That only increased the value of trying this now. Also, every woman other than the old woman was an acceptable result for the two of them.

They crouched down and began drawing up a detailed map with a fallen stick.

"Quenser, doesn't this part go like this? The base is made up of over one hundred large vehicles, so what looks like a wall can actually be opened."

"No, Heivia! We can't use a camera! This is just a vacation event , so we need to keep it at the tried and true method of peering over the fence. A gentleman must follow the rules."

"I think you're disqualified as gentlemen the instant you try to peep," sighed the old maintenance woman.

Quenser and Heivia continued their strategy meeting, but the old woman radioed Froleytia once their plans became a little more realistic. That was when everything went downhill. The two idiots were forced to run around while chased by a military vehicle driven by an especially muscular soldier and with Froleytia sticking her upper body out of the roof.

They shouted while running with all their might.

"What is wrong with her!? If she runs us over, there's no way we'll rest in peace!! And why isn't she and her huge breasts in the bath!? Go wait in the women's bath, you idiot!!"

"No, wait!! Do you think we can find a way to escape into the princess's personal shower room? We might be able to get the whole intrusion thing written off as force majeure!"

However, the world they lived in was not that convenient.

The two enemies of women were ultimately cornered, taken away by muscular soldiers, and forced to clean toilets as punishment. Nothing could have been worse.

"But…"

"What?"

"We know it isn't these MIB, but who actually knows why the world ended up the way it is? The people who experienced the atmosphere of the time are growing older and dying off."

"It's possible someone really was fighting to bring back the world police before those people took the name for themselves. They may have been buried in the shadows of history while still holding the truth of these wars, and now someone else used their empty husk and name."

Quenser leaned up against the bathroom wall while speaking.

His knees trembled from extreme exhaustion and he felt as if he would end up kissing the bathroom floor if he relaxed for even an instant.

Nevertheless, he somehow managed to remain standing and stared off into the distance.

"While there's still someone to ask, it might be a good idea to ask someone what it was truly like back then. …We could ask the old maintenance woman, I suppose."

Even as he spoke, the flames of the next war began to burn brightly in the darkness.

Those wars continued on and on with no one knowing the reason why.

Afterword

Volume 7! Whether you bought them one at a time or all at once , hello.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The story began with a wrong number. When you receive a threatening call from an unknown kidnapper, how far will you go for a complete stranger!? It began that way, but Quenser and the others demonstrated how far from the standard they are by how everything spiraled out of control once they got involved. It comes back to the fact that they normally handle wars rather than incidents.

This time, I narrowed the focus down to Oceania. As you would know from reading Volume 1, the Oceanian military nation's Generation 0.5 was a deteriorated version of the Rush piloted by the Information Alliance's "oh ho ho". The core of this story is found in the question of who brought that classified information to Oceania. If you recall where the Information Alliance's home country is, you might realize it would be a relatively easy task for " them".

The enemy was the MIB. That mysterious organization often appears in urban legends related to UFOs. In this series, they do not handle UFOs and aliens. Instead, they are in control of the secrets of Objects and the reason behind the destruction of the world map. Well, it's very like this series to not let anything be so

simple. Objects are the greatest "foreign element" in this series, so I wrote this thinking they would be a good bet as for who would have the secrets behind Objects. What did you think?

I must thank my illustrator, Nagi Ryou-san, and my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. It may have been more difficult to handle a story filled with large crowds than one with Objects. I apologize for all the trouble I put them through.

I would also like to thank the readers. I created this series primarily to provide the simple sense of exhilaration of slaying a giant foe, but your acceptance of it has given me great opportunity that I cannot put into words. I will try my hand at various things from here on out, so please continue your support.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Things have finally settled down in Oceania…

-Kamachi Kazuma